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The office of ruling elder  
in the Christian church







THE  
OFFICE OF RULING ELDER  
IN THE  
CHRISTIAN CHURCH:

ITS DIVINE AUTHORITY, DUTIES, AND  
RESPONSIBILITIES.

BY ~~THE~~  
✓  
REV. JOHN M'KERROW, D.D.,  
BRIDGE OF TEITH.

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MDCCCXLVI.

“ These things write I unto thee, . . . that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God.”—1 TIM. iii. 14, 15.

MURRAY AND GIBB, PRINTERS, EDINBURGH.

## PREFATORY NOTICE.

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ABOUT the beginning of the year 1844, a friend, —whose mind had been strongly turned to the subject of the office of the Ruling Elder, as one of the most characteristic and important features of our Presbyterian polity, and deeply impressed with the conviction that were the duties of that office better understood and more systematically, conscientiously, and affectionately performed, the spiritual prosperity of our churches would be greatly increased, and more done to recommend our model of church order to brethren who have adopted what we deem a less scriptural ecclesiastical platform, than is likely to be effected by any controversial discussion,—requested me to take measures to obtain a succinct, clear, practical Treatise on this topic, by offering a Prize of Fifty Pounds to the Author of the Essay which, among such as might be presented

for competition, should appear, to a committee of qualified adjudicators, best fitted to gain his object.

My first work, on receiving this welcome commission, was to attempt to secure competent judges—and I will be universally admitted to have been very successful here : The Rev. ROBERT BALMER, D.D., Berwick ; ROBERT GORDON, D.D., Edinburgh ; and GAVIN STRUTHERS, D.D., Glasgow, kindly undertook this task.

The following advertisement was then published in the religious Magazines, and in the most extensively-circulated newspapers of this country :—

PRIZE ESSAY.—The sum of FIFTY POUNDS STERLING is offered for the best Essay on the following subject :—The SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY, DUTIES, and RESPONSIBILITIES of the OFFICE of “RULING ELDER” in the Christian Church.

The Duties of the “Elder” and those of the “Deacon” to be clearly distinguished from each other.

A deep conviction has been produced on the minds of many who wish well to Zion, that the Presbyterian Churches have been much less efficient than might reasonably have been expected from their principles and constitution ; and that this inefficiency may be traced, in no small degree, to

the imperfect manner in which, in very many cases, the duties of the Ruling Elder have been discharged.

It is believed that, with the Divine blessing, a Faithful, Active, Judicious, Prayerful, Persevering, discharge of these Duties, in connexion with a clear and full proclamation of the Gospel by the Ministers of the Word, would promote in these Churches, Order, Purity, Activity, Charity, Spirituality, and Fruitfulness, in a much higher degree than has yet been attained, and lead to results at once *honourable to Christianity and its Author, beneficial to themselves* in the advancement of a higher standard of Christian character, and *advantageous to the World* that lieth under the power of the Wicked One.

It is for the purpose of turning the attention of the Churches to this important subject, that the proposed Essay is called for. To diffuse information on the subject, it is desired that, when prepared, it be extensively circulated; and in order that it may be published *at a Small Price*, the Contributor reserves the right to print and publish any number of copies, without restriction or further charge for copyright. It is wished that the work be compendious, extending to about 200 duodecimo pages, on a medium type.

The Essays to be forwarded to the Rev. Dr BROWN, 10, Gayfield Square, Edinburgh, with the names of the Authors enclosed in Sealed Packets, by the First of August 1844. When the Decision has been given, the Manuscripts (with the exception of the one preferred) will be returned to the owners on application.

The Rev. Dr GORDON, Edinburgh, the Rev. Dr BALMER, Berwick, and the Rev. Dr STRUTHIERS, Glasgow, have kindly agreed to act as Adjudicators.

Previously to the expiry of the time for receiving Essays, which, at the request of intending competitors, was somewhat extended, one of the adjudicators, the Rev. Dr BALMER, was removed by death, and the Rev. HUGH HEUGH, D.D., Glasgow, obligingly consented to fill the vacancy.

Nine Essays were sent in, and submitted to the judgment of the adjudicators. Various circumstances prevented their united judgment from being given so soon as anticipated. When given it was unanimous, and is as follows :—

We, the appointed adjudicators of a Prize of Fifty Pounds for the best Essay on the Office of the Ruling Elder, after examination of the Nine Essays presented in competition, have adjudged the prize to the Author of the Essay having the motto, Tim. iii. 14, 15, “These things write I unto thee, &c.,” which, on opening the sealed note accompanying it, was found to be the work of the Rev. JOHN M’KERROW, D.D., Minister of the United Secession Church, Bridge of Teith.

ROBERT GORDON, Minister, Edinburgh.

H. HEUGH, Minister, Glasgow.

GAVIN STRUTHERS, Minister, Glasgow.

NOVEMBER, 1845.

When the Prize was offered, neither my friend nor myself was aware of the intention of the

Rev. David King, LL.D., Glasgow, to publish on the subject of the office of the Ruling Elder. It gives us both high satisfaction to observe the general interest which Dr King's valuable treatise has excited, and the high approbation which it has obtained. The field is, however, so extensive, and the plans of the two Essays so different, that the one is in no degree fitted to supersede the other. Dr King, instead of regarding Dr M'Kerrow as an intruder, will, we are persuaded, most gladly welcome such an efficient co-operator in the good work of attempting so to influence the minds of our Elders, as that very many of them shall attain that "double honour" which belongs to those who "rule well."

JOHN BROWN.

EDINBURGH, APRIL 12, 1846.





## P R E F A C E.

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IN the following treatise the Author has entered fully into the scriptural argument in support of the divine authority of the office of ruling elder. He has established on grounds, which he trusts will appear satisfactory to the mass of his readers, that the government of the church by a class of persons bearing the title of *Elder*, or *Overseer*, is that particular form of administration which Christ, in his infinite wisdom, has thought proper to institute. He has pointed out the duties which those, who are invested with the office of the eldership, are required by their divine Master to perform ; and he has shown that the responsibilities connected with this office are peculiarly solemn. He has given to the varied contents of the Essay as popular and practical a shape

as the subjects discussed will admit of. While he has made it his study, on the one hand, to avoid offending the good taste of those who may be addicted to literary pursuits,—he has endeavoured, on the other, to recommend himself, by the plainness and simplicity of his language, to persons of uneducated habits; and it will afford him much gratification to learn, that his work has obtained favour in the eyes of that large and influential class, for whose benefit it is chiefly intended—the Scottish eldership.

In the advertisement, proposing a prize for the best Essay on the office of ruling elder, there was a limitation mentioned as to the number of pages of which the work should consist. The Author, in preparing his Essay with a view to the competition, felt himself fettered by this restrictive clause; and was obliged to compress his observations, in certain departments of the subject, within narrower limits than he might otherwise have done—as he did not consider himself at liberty to transgress (at least to any great extent) the bounds prescribed. But since

the competition was decided in his favour, he has, with the concurrence of the gentleman who gave the prize, inserted an additional chapter (the eighth) containing a variety of practical suggestions concerning the working of the eldership; and he flatters himself that the addition thus made will render his work more useful to that class of office-bearers, for whose benefit it has been penned, and give it a better claim to the approbation of the public.

A chapter of considerable length has been devoted to the consideration of the office of deacon. The Author has endeavoured to show that this office is of divine institution, that it was designed to be of permanent continuance in the church, and that those congregations, who have permitted it to pass into dissuetude, are chargeable with criminal neglect. A variety of considerations have been adduced in the course of the work, to show that the office of deacon ought to be revived in all our churches.

It augurs well for the advancement of religion in our country, that the great body of the eldership are becoming more devoted in their Master's

service, and are taking a more prominent part in the management of ecclesiastical affairs than they have hitherto done. Meetings have been held by them in various quarters, the avowed object of which has been to stir up one another to the more vigorous discharge of the duties connected with their office, and to devise methods of more extended usefulness in the church of Christ. A laudable anxiety has been manifested to elevate the tone of piety and intelligence throughout the whole circle of office-bearers, and to deepen upon their minds a sense of the responsibility connected with the honourable situation which they hold. Such, I believe, was the praiseworthy object which the public-spirited gentleman had in view, who proposed the prize that has been awarded to the writer of these pages. How far this object may be accomplished by the Essay, to which his liberality has given birth, remains yet to be determined.

The Author ushers his little volume into the world, conscious of its many imperfections—and with a trembling anxiety lest it may come far

short of the object, for which the prize has been given, and disappoint the expectations which it is reasonable to entertain of the production of an individual, who has been successful in a literary competition. He has only further to add, that whatever may be the estimate, formed by others, of the result of his labours, he has been truly desirous to contribute his mite of usefulness to the christian church, by endeavouring to establish on solid grounds the divine authority of the eldership, and by exerting himself to elevate the character and promote the efficiency of those who have been called, by the suffrages of their fellow-christians, to occupy this highly responsible situation.

He consecrates his Essay to the service of him whose cause it professes to support—with a fervent prayer, that he who sits as King upon the holy hill of Zion would render it instrumental in promoting a spirit of fidelity and devotedness in those who have been appointed to administer the affairs of his kingdom upon earth.

BRIDGE OF TEITH, April 13, 1846.



## CONTENTS.

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### CHAPTER I.

PAGE

Introductory remarks, showing that some kind of government is necessary for the church—The question stated, Has Christ appointed in the New Testament any particular form of government to be observed in his church? —Preliminary statements, showing what consequences would follow from maintaining the negative view of this question—Question answered in the affirmative—Arguments adduced in support of it—Argument first, It is affirmed that God hath set governments in the church—Argument second, The practice of the apostles corresponded with what they declared to be the appointment of God on this subject—Argument third, A platform of ecclesiastical discipline laid down in the apostolical writings—Testimony of Lightfoot and Milton on the subject, 1

### CHAPTER II.

The nature of church power stated—Its source—Its limits—The end for which it is conferred—The power of government not lodged in the community of the faithful—

Arguments advanced in support of this statement—	
Argument first, No mention made in Scripture of any such power being given by Christ to the body of the people	
—Argument second, It is obvious from mention being made of diversified gifts that Christ never intended that all should rule—Argument third, The directions given by the apostles to the members of the primitive churches show that the great majority of them were in subjection	
—Argument fourth, If in each congregation all the members have the power of ruling, the question presents itself, Whom are they to obey?—Argument fifth, No power delegated by the people, recognised by Christ in his church—Argument sixth, No instance mentioned in the New Testament of the people acting as rulers in the church—1 Cor. v. 1-5, examined—Remarks on Matt. xviii. 15-17—Testimony of Dr Owen, . . . . .	21

### CHAPTER III.

Office-bearers appointed by God—Extraordinary office-bearers — Ordinary office-bearers — Jewish eldership—Christian eldership—Persons appointed to rule in the church—Scriptural arguments in support of this position --Argument first, The fact is plainly and unequivocally stated, that elders were ordained by the apostles in every church—Argument second, It appears evident from the New Testament that every church had a *plurality* of elders —Argument third, The elders mentioned in the New Testament were appointed for the purpose of *overseeing* the church—Argument fourth, We find a variety of titles given to elders expressive of their being possessed of



authority—Argument fifth, The eldership is mentioned in the New Testament as a distinct office, and the qualifications for this office are minutely pointed out—Argument sixth, Special directions are given as to the manner in which the duties of the eldership are to be performed—Argument seventh, Members of the church are instructed in the duty which they owe to their spiritual rulers, . 52

## CHAPTER IV.

Ruling elders—A distinct class from the teaching elders—Presumptive proof of this—Direct evidence—Rom. xii. 8—1 Cor. xii. 28, 29—1 Tim. v. 17—These passages examined—Objections answered—Reflections suggested by the evidence—Opinion of Dr Owen concerning the eldership, . . . . . 77

## CHAPTER V.

Christian Fathers—What degree of credit to be attached to their writings—Their testimony in favour of the eldership—Clemens Romanus—Ignatius—Polycarp—Justin Martyr—Irenæus—Tertullian—Origen—Ambrose—Jerome—The eldership retained among the Waldenses—Adopted by the Bohemian Brethren—Introduced by Calvin into the church of Geneva—Received generally by the reformed churches—The English Puritans in favour of it—The Independent party in the Westminster Assembly of Divines express their willingness to receive it—Testimonies from congregational writers in favour of ruling elders—Testimonies from episcopalian writers—Summary of evidence, . . . . . 108

## CHAPTER VI.

PAGE

Qualifications necessary in ruling elders—Piety—Knowledge—Practical wisdom—Experience in the christian life—A blameless conduct—Duties of the eldership—Ruling—Overseeing—Watching for souls—Visitation of the sick—Family visitation—Instructing the young—Setting an example to the flock—The manner in which the duties of the eldership are to be performed—Faithfully—Diligently—Impartially—Affectionately—In humble dependence upon divine grace—Encouragements to ruling elders—Christ's promise to be with them in their meetings—His promise to ratify their decisions, . . . 147

## CHAPTER VII.

Office of the deacon—Opinions concerning the office—First deacons of the christian church—The office of divine appointment—Proofs in support of this—The office of the deacon distinct from that of the teaching or ruling elder—Deacons in all the primitive churches—The office designed to be permanent—Duties of the office—Preaching and ruling no part of these duties—Deacons appointed to take charge of the poor—Scriptural injunctions on this subject—Extract from the writings of Dr Dick—Testimony of Dr Dwight—Evils arising from uniting the office of the deacon and the office of the elder in the same person—Opinion of Dr Chalmers—Deacons may be usefully employed in managing the pecuniary affairs of congregations, . . . . . 179

## CHAPTER VIII.

PAGE

Inadequate views entertained of the office of the eldership—	
—Inefficient manner in which the duties of it are performed by many—Honourable exceptions to this statement—Promising symptom of the present times connected with the eldership—Practical suggestions for the consideration of elders—Their conduct viewed in relation to the presbytery—Their conduct as members of session—The duty that they owe to the young—Their conduct viewed in relation to missionary exertion—The part that they ought to take in the general management of the affairs of the congregation—A plea for the revival of the office of deacon—The duties of the ruling elder and of the deacon viewed in relation to each other—The office of the latter subordinate and auxiliary to the office of the former, . . . . .	222

## CHAPTER IX.

Responsibility of elders—Responsibility connected with declining to accept of the office of elder—Excuses of those who decline accepting of the office considered—Address to elders—The nature of the charge committed to them—The person from whom they receive their charge—The object for which it is committed to them—The prosperity of religion much dependent on the manner in which they discharge the duties of their office—Address to members of presbyterian churches—The
---

duty of maintaining the presbyterian form of government	
—The advantages of it—A union among the various sections of evangelical presbyterians desirable—Practicable—The aspect of the present times calls loudly for such a union—The duty of cultivating a feeling of brotherly affection toward Christians of all religious denominations—Concluding statements, . . . . .	254

THE  
OFFICE OF RULING ELDER.

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CHAPTER I.

Introductory remarks, showing that some kind of government is necessary for the church—The question stated, Has Christ appointed in the New Testament any particular form of government to be observed in his church?—Preliminary statements, showing what consequences would follow from maintaining the negative view of this question—Question answered in the affirmative—Arguments adduced in support of it—Argument first, It is affirmed that God hath set governments in the church—Argument second, The practice of the apostles corresponded with what they declared to be the appointment of God on this subject—Argument third, A platform of ecclesiastical discipline laid down in the apostolical writings—Testimony of Lightfoot and Milton on the subject.

THAT government of some kind or another is necessary for the church of Christ, is a proposition the truth of which few, if any, will be inclined to question. Without laws no society can exist. These are necessary for the maintenance of order; and

where there are laws, persons must be appointed to administer them. Without the appointment of such individuals—laws, however good in themselves, will be ineffectual; seeing it is only by the firm and impartial administration of them that the ends of good government can be obtained. The statements now made, hold true of civil society; and they are no less applicable to that spiritual community designated *the church*. The existence of such a community without laws, without office-bearers, or any kind of government, would be a complete anomaly. Such a supposition (were I to make it) would be alike opposed to the dictates of reason and of Scripture.

Regarding it, then, as a point which is incontrovertible, that some kind of government is necessary for the church—the question which I propose considering in this chapter, preparatory to the discussion of the main subject of this treatise, is, Whether Christ has appointed any particular form of government for the church in its New Testament state, or, Whether he has left it discretionary to the civil rulers of a country, or to the church itself, to institute such a form as they, in their wisdom, may think best adapted to the prevailing genius of a nation, or to the particular exigencies of the times? In taking a survey of the arguments, which have been advanced in sup-

port of the conflicting views contained in the question now stated, I have been led decidedly to adopt the opinion of those who maintain the proposition contained in the first part of the question, namely, that Christ has appointed a particular form of government for the New Testament church. If this proposition can be established by arguments deduced from Scripture, it follows as a necessary consequence, that to this form of government all are bound, from a regard to the authority of Christ, to adhere. Before presenting my readers with the arguments, which Scripture furnishes in support of the proposition now mentioned, I shall make a few preliminary statements.

*First*, None will question that the church existing under the Old Testament dispensation had a divinely-appointed form of government: The persons who were to act as office-bearers—the nature of the authority with which they were invested—the kind of discipline they were required to exercise—and the work they were expected to perform—were all pointed out with a precision and minuteness, which left no room for uncertainty on any of these points. If the gospel church have no particular form of government laid down by its great Head, according to which its discipline is to be administered—if men

have been left to regulate its affairs according to their own pleasure—then must it be regarded as occupying an inferior position to that which was occupied by the Jewish church, and as labouring under disadvantages which did not attach to its predecessor. But how will this agree with those parts of Scripture which, in describing the state of things existing under the New Testament economy, represent it as in every respect superior to that which existed under the Old. So great is this superiority, that the one is said to have the *substance*—while the other had only the *shadow*.

*Secondly*, The gospel church is Christ's spiritual kingdom—that kingdom concerning which such glorious things were predicted by the prophets—and which is destined to acquire a universal and uncontrollable ascendancy in our world. The boundaries of it shall extend from sea to sea. The number of its subjects shall be countless as the dew drops of the morning : and the influence exercised by it over the affairs of men shall be such as to change the very aspect of society, and to produce on our earth a long period of millennial glory. How strange would it appear, if the glorious person who presides over this kingdom had given no directions with regard to the manner in which its affairs are to be administered



upon earth — if he had prescribed no laws for its government, and had appointed no office-bearers to see that every thing connected with this spiritual community be done “decently and in order.” A kingdom, comprising in it such a vast number of subjects, yet without laws, and without subordinate rulers, clothed with authority from Christ, to administer its affairs, would be a complete solecism. If such a supposition as this were admitted to be correct, then we would be obliged to acknowledge that Christ’s kingdom laboured under defects greater than are found to exist in any of the kingdoms of this world.

*Thirdly,* If Christ has appointed no particular form of government for his church, the question may fairly be asked, Who shall take upon them to determine what kind of government is best adapted to this spiritual society? Must it not be presumption in any man, or in any class of men, to determine what (according to this supposition) Christ, in his infinite wisdom, has left undetermined? The natural inference to be deduced from this theory is, that if the King of Zion has not thought proper to make known to us any particular plan, according to which he wishes the affairs of his kingdom upon earth to be administered, men ought to leave this matter as

Christ himself has left it. They should not have the appearance—by sketching out schemes of government which he has not sanctioned—of aspiring to the honour of legislating for the church. In what other light can such conduct be regarded than an impious usurpation of the prerogative of the Prince of Peace—by presuming to appoint a form of government for his kingdom, when he himself has not thought proper to do so.

*Fourthly*, If there be no scheme of ecclesiastical government sketched out in Scripture—which we are to regard as of divine authority—then one of two things must follow. Either the church must be without any government at all, or it must be governed according to such schemes as human wisdom may suggest. The first part of this alternative none will admit. Without some kind of government, the church would soon become completely disorganised. If we admit the second part of the alternative, who does not see that this is throwing open the door to every species of abuse. We could have no security whatever that the forms of government, which men thought proper to institute, would be in accordance with the spirit of christianity. Nay, knowing as we do how much the bulk of mankind are influenced by the workings of ambition, or

self-interest, or caprice—we might rather anticipate that the schemes, which they devised for the government of the house of God, would be at variance with the purity and simplicity of the gospel. Should any find fault with schemes of this description, and say that they ought not to exist, those who originated them, and who were interested in their support, might plead in their own vindication,—that this was a matter concerning which no definite rule had been laid down by the great Head of the church—and that none could warrantably interfere with them for acting according to their own particular views of what was right.

Having premised these things, for the purpose of showing what serious difficulties are connected with the opinion of those who maintain that there is no particular plan of government laid down for the New Testament church, which we are warranted in regarding as of divine institution, I now proceed to adduce the scripture authority which we have for maintaining the opposite opinion.

*First*, We find it expressly affirmed that God hath set governments in the church. In the first epistle to the Corinthians (xii. 28) the writer says—“ God hath set some in the church, first, apostles ; secondarily, prophets ; thirdly, teachers ; after that

miracles ; then gifts of healing, helps, *governments*, &c.” The apostle is here speaking of the visible church. He compares it, in the preceding context, to the human body which consists of many members. He represents it as having had conferred upon it a variety of gifts—and as comprehending in it all officers, both extraordinary and ordinary. That it is to the church, not as existing under the Old Testament, but as existing under the New, that he here refers, is evident from his mentioning only the New Testament officers. In this church, he declares, there is a government settled :—“ God hath set governments in it.” The abstract here is put for the concrete ; *governments* for *governors*. The term in the original (*κυβερνησεις*) describes the conduct of the pilot, or shipmaster, when by means of the rudder and compass he guides the vessel in its voyage across the deep. So those, who in this passage are styled *governments*, are persons to whom has been intrusted, under its divine Head, the government of the church. They could not with any propriety have such a designation, as this applied to them, if they had not a power of government conferred upon them.

Should any affirm, that the term *governments* in this passage is applicable to the civil magistrate, it is a sufficient answer to those who make such an

affirmation to say, that these “governments” were set in the church for a period of at least 300 years before any civil magistrate was connected with her; and we have not the slightest hint given of this power of government being taken from the church and conferred, at any future period, upon the civil magistrate. Besides, all the other officers mentioned in this passage are purely ecclesiastical; and it would be incongruous to suppose the apostle inserting in such an enumeration a class of officers merely political, without giving any notice of his doing so. This verse, then, teaches us, that governments in the church are of divine institution: for “God hath set” (εθετο)—hath constituted or ordained them in it. In accordance with this doctrine, Paul, writing to the same church and speaking of the authority, (εξουσια) which he and his fellow-labourers exercised, says that it was divinely conferred:—“our authority which *the Lord hath given us* for edification, and not for destruction;” 2 Cor. x. 8.

*Secondly,* We find that the practice of the apostles completely coincided with what they declared to be the appointment of God on this subject:—That is, we find them ordaining office-bearers in all the churches, and intimating that, while they did so, they acted by a divine authority. What the apostles

did in the planting and organising of churches, we are to consider them as having done according to the express letter of commandments given them by Christ. It is on this ground that Christians have always regarded the practice of the apostles as indicating the mind of Christ with no less clearness than their injunctions; and they have considered themselves bound to adhere to the precedents furnished by the former, as well as to follow the directions given in the latter. Dr Owen has justly remarked —“ The example and practice of the apostles in the erection of churches, in the appointment of officers and rulers in them, in directions given for their walking, order, administration of censures and all other holy things, are a sufficient indication of the mind and will of Christ about them. We do not say, that in themselves they are institutions and appointments, but they infallibly declare what is so, or the mind of Christ concerning those things. Nor can this be questioned without a denial of their infallibility, faithfulness and divine authority.”<sup>1</sup>

From the account, which the writer of the Acts of the Apostles gives in the beginning of that book (chap. i. 2, 3), we learn, that Christ spent forty days

<sup>1</sup> Enquiry into the Origin, Nature, Institution, &c. of Evangelical Churches. P. 36.

with his apostles, after he rose from the dead and before he ascended to heaven—and that during that period he conversed with them “of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God”—that is, of the things pertaining to the gospel dispensation, which was now commenced. We are told also, that during that period, he gave “commandments to the apostles.” The history that follows is to be regarded as containing a faithful record of the manner in which the apostles carried into effect the commandments that were given them by their divine Master, when he spake to them “of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” In this history it is mentioned, that, after the descent of the Holy Ghost on the Day of Pentecost, the apostles preached the gospel first in Jerusalem—then in the other towns of Judea—and afterward in the more distant provinces of the Roman empire. Those whom they converted to the christian faith, they formed into churches; and in every one of the churches thus formed, “they ordained them elders.” No reasonable doubt can be entertained, that it was one of the commandments, which they had received from Christ, to do this. The simple fact recorded, that they “ordained them elders in *every* church” (Acts xiv. 23), shows, that they were acting according to a



system which had previously been laid down for their guidance.

In making such statements as these, we are not left to mere conjecture. We are furnished, by the testimony of one of the most distinguished of the apostles, with a complete corroboration of the view now given. Paul, addressing the elders of the church of Ephesus, in the very affecting interview which he had with them at Miletus, said unto them, "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which *the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers*;" Acts xx. 28. These elders were amongst the number of those whom the apostles had ordained: yet it is said, that the Holy Ghost had made them overseers. Does not this language clearly indicate, that when the apostles ordained these elders, they were acting agreeably to the mind of the Holy Ghost? They were doing *his* work—acting under a divine authority. But the language now quoted ("the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers") was not applicable solely to the elders of the church of Ephesus; it was applicable, on the very same principle, to the elders whom the apostles ordained *in all the churches*. If so, is there not here indisputable evidence furnished, that the ordaining of persons to the office of the eldership is of divine institution? When we connect



the historical fact, on which I have now been commenting, with the statement made by an apostle, which has previously been noticed—that “ God hath set governments in the church”—we are fairly warranted in drawing the conclusion, that there is a divinely-instituted form of church government laid down, to which Christians are bound to adhere in all ages.

*Thirdly*, Another argument, which I adduce in support of this statement, is, that we find marked out, in the writings of the apostles, a platform of discipline, with an intimation given, that it was designed to be of permanent continuance in the church. That portion of the apostolical writings, to which I here chiefly refer, is the first epistle to Timothy, which contains in it a delineation of a plan of government for the church. The following things in reference to this subject, are distinctly pointed out by the writer of that epistle.

1. He mentions two classes of office-bearers—and only two : these are overseers (or elders) and deacons. Chap. iii. 1–12.

2. He states particularly the qualifications which the persons, who are elected to these offices, ought to possess.

3. He points out the manner in which they are

to be set apart to their respective offices. It is by the laying on of the hands of the presbytery, or eldership. In this way Timothy himself had been set apart to the work of the ministry; and in this way he was to set apart others. Chap. iv. 14, and v. 22.

4. A distinction is made between two classes of elders. One class only rule : another class, besides ruling, labour in word and doctrine. Chap. v. 17.

5. The work of an elder is distinctly pointed out. He is to rule, and to “take care of the church of God;” Chap. iii. 5.

6. He gives directions also with regard to the work of a deacon, pointing out the class of widows that are to be considered as deserving of receiving support from the charitable fund of the church. Chap. v. 3-16.

7. He mentions the kind of treatment, which elders are to receive :—“Rebuke not an elder, but entreat him as a father”—“Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in word and doctrine”—“Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses;” Chap. v. 1, 17, 19.

8. Directions are given concerning the administering of rebuke to offenders. “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear;” Chap. v. 20.

The particulars, now enumerated, are stated with sufficient plainness in the first epistle to Timothy. The statement of them by the apostle was designed, in the first place, to guide Timothy in his work as an evangelist, that he might set in order the things that were necessary with regard to the churches. But sufficient evidence is to be found in the epistle itself—and also in certain passages that occur in the second epistle—to convince us, that these things were penned by Paul, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, not merely for the direction of Timothy, but to serve as a pattern of church-government—to be followed by the christian church in all succeeding ages. I shall briefly glance at the evidence, which these epistles furnish in support of the proposition now stated.

*First*, Paul in the first chapter of the first epistle—after an introduction which terminates at the 17th verse—states that he is about to commit to Timothy a charge concerning the work in which, as a minister of the gospel, he was engaged.

*Secondly*, After stating a variety of particulars—among which he expatiates largely on the offices of the elder and the deacon—he adds these words, “These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou

mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God;" Chap. iii. 14, 15. Here the apostle expressly declares, that these things were written by him that Timothy might know how to administer the affairs of the house of God—what office-bearers he was to appoint, and what discipline he was to exercise. If Timothy might know, from what Paul thus wrote, what office-bearers were to be appointed, and what kind of government was to be observed, in the church, *we* certainly may know, from the same writings, what these office-bearers are, and what that discipline is which ecclesiastical rulers are required to observe. What Paul wrote on this subject was designed for our instruction, as well as for that of Timothy: for, after a few additional statements in the beginning of the fourth chapter, he says (verse 6th), "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ"—and then a little farther on he adds (verse 11th), "These things *command* and *teach*."

*Thirdly*, Paul reverts to the subject of the eldership in the fifth chapter—where he also dwells on the duties connected with the office of the deacon—and to show the importance of a faithful adherence

to the rules which he lays down, for the guidance of office-bearers in the government of the church, he addresses Timothy in the following solemn terms (verse 21), "I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things, without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality." And when about to conclude his address, he renews his charge in language equally solemn (chap. vi. 13, 14), "I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession, that thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." The "commandment" which Timothy is here charged to keep "without spot" comprehends the whole of what has been enjoined concerning discipline in the preceding chapters, and must not be limited (as some have supposed) to the particular precept that goes immediately before. Should any object to this interpretation, that the term *commandment* is in the singular number, and cannot with propriety be interpreted as having a plural meaning, I would remind those who make this objection, that the apostle employs the same term, in a plural sense, in the fifth verse of the first chapter of the same epistle ;

and this may be regarded as good authority for understanding it, in a similar sense, in the fourteenth verse of the last chapter.

*Fourthly,* As another argument, to show that the directions given to Timothy, in the first epistle, were not intended solely for his personal guidance, but were designed to furnish a platform of ecclesiastical discipline, to be maintained in the church in all succeeding ages, I refer my readers to a statement contained in the second epistle, addressed to the same individual,—where Paul says, “The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also ;” chap. ii. 2. No one will question, that among the things which Timothy had heard of Paul, were the injunctions concerning office-bearers and discipline, contained in the first epistle. *These things* Timothy was not to keep to himself. He was to commit them “to faithful men ;” and these faithful men were “to teach others also”—so that generation after generation might know and observe the ordinances delivered by the apostle, in the name of Christ, concerning the government of the house of God—“which is the church of the living God.” As we then have been taught by the servant of Christ, speaking to us in the name of his Master, on this

important subject, so we are warranted—by the command addressed to Timothy—“to teach others also.”

From the premises that have been stated in the preceding pages, the following conclusion is fairly deducible—that a scheme of government for the christian church has been laid down in Scripture, and that this scheme is of permanent and universal obligation. We are not at liberty to reject or alter it—but are bound to adhere to it, as it has been authoritatively delivered to us by the Spirit of God.

In support of the views, which have been advanced in this chapter, I shall quote the language of two distinguished writers:—“Timothy (says Lightfoot), had two works to perform in Ephesus; first, to prevent the rise of errors and heterodoxies; and, secondly, to direct and order the orthodox aright in worship and discipline (not as a diocesan bishop, for he staid but a while there, and what he did, he did but at the apostle’s direction), but as one whom Paul had found to be bold, emulous, painful, and faithful.”—And again, “Paul lays down a divine directory before him, concerning their manner of praying—choosing and ordaining ministers—approving deacons—admitting widows—and regulating the people, that nothing could be wanting to the healthful temper of

the church, if they receive and embrace his application.”<sup>1</sup>

Milton, referring to the directions given by Paul to Timothy, says—“Thus we find here, that the rules of church discipline are not only commanded, but hedged about with such a terrible impalement of commands, that he that will break through wilfully to violate the least of them must hazard the wounding of his conscience even unto death.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lightfoot's Works, vol. i., pp. 307, 308.

<sup>2</sup> The Reason of Church Government urged against Prelacy. B. I. Ch. 2.



## CHAPTER II.

The nature of church power stated—Its source—Its limits—The end for which it is conferred—The power of government not lodged in the community of the faithful—Arguments advanced in support of this statement—Argument first, No mention made in Scripture of any such power being given by Christ to the body of the people—Argument second, It is obvious from mention being made of diversified gifts that Christ never intended that all should rule—Argument third, The directions given by the apostles to the members of the primitive churches show that the great majority of them were in subjection—Argument fourth, If in each congregation all the members have the power of ruling, the question presents itself, Whom are they to obey?—Argument fifth, No power delegated by the people, recognised by Christ in his church—Argument sixth, No instance mentioned in the New Testament of the people acting as rulers in the church—1 Cor. v. 1-5, examined—Remarks on Matt. xviii. 15-17—Testimony of Dr Owen.

HAVING shown, in the preceding chapter, that we have scriptural grounds for affirming that Christ has prescribed a form of government, to be observed in his church,—and that the outlines of this form are marked out with considerable distinctness in the writings of the apostles—I now proceed to inquire, in whom the power of administration has been lodged;

—whether in the community of the faithful, or in office-bearers appointed for the purpose of bearing rule in the house of God. But before entering upon this inquiry, I shall make some remarks with the view of pointing out the nature and defining the limits of that power which those, who are invested with authority in the church, are permitted to exercise.

I remark first, concerning this power, that it is wholly spiritual. It is spiritual as to the *source* from which it proceeds—being derived not from any earthly sovereign, nor from any body of men, but from Christ the exalted mediator. It is spiritual as to the *rule*, according to which it is exercised. This rule is not the maxims of state policy, nor any human enactments, but the word of God. It is spiritual as to the *objects* about which it is exercised. It interferes not with the lives and property of men ; nor does it take cognisance of trespasses committed against the political institutions of a country : But it deals with men as subjects of Christ's spiritual kingdom—and it deals with them for the purpose of preventing and correcting offences committed against the laws of Christ. It is spiritual as to the *means* by which it proposes accomplishing its ends. It does not attempt to keep men in the way of duty, by proffering to them worldly honours and emoluments ; nor does it

punish men for offences committed against the laws of Christ, by depriving them of their property, their liberty or life. The means which it employs, for accomplishing the ends of discipline, are admonition, censure, and casting out from the communion of the church those who show themselves unworthy of its privileges.

I remark secondly, concerning this power, that Christ is the fountain-head of it. Those who are called upon to exercise it in the church, derive it from him. The government is upon his shoulder. He it is, "that hath the key of David, that openeth and no man shutteth; and shutteth and no man openeth."<sup>1</sup> "All power (said Christ) is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."<sup>2</sup> Paul, referring to the authority which he and his fellow-labourers exercised in the church, uniformly speaks of it as an authority derived from Christ. (2 Cor. x. 8; and xiii. 10).

I remark thirdly, concerning this power, that it is wholly administrative. It is in no respect legislative. Christ has not conferred on any individual,

<sup>1</sup> Rev. iii. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. xxviii. 18-20.

nor on any set of men, the power of making laws for his church. He is the *sole* lawgiver. Those who attempt to legislate for the church of Christ usurp a prerogative, which belongs only to the King of Zion. This attempt at legislating for the house of God has proved a fertile source of corruption, and has introduced sad disorders into the church. The only power which Christ confers on those who bear rule in his house, is the power of administering the laws which he has laid down. Beyond this point their authority does not extend. Both those who rule and those who are ruled have the same lawgiver to whose enactments they are bound to conform. These enactments (which are contained in the sacred volume) point out definitely the line of duty which the two classes now mentioned are bound to pursue.

I remark fourthly, concerning this power, that it is conferred by Christ solely with a view to the edification of the church. Paul, writing concerning the various classes of office-bearers that Christ has given to the church, says that they have been given "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ;" Eph. iv. 12. The same apostle, speaking of the authority which he exercised, in common with the

other apostles, says that it was given them by Christ “for edification and not for destruction.” And when giving directions to the office-bearers of the primitive churches, with regard to the manner in which they were to exercise the gifts which had been conferred upon them, he lays down this general rule for their guidance—“Seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church”—and “Let all things be done to edifying;” 1 Cor. xiv. 12, 26. With a view, then, to this great end, namely, the edifying of the body of Christ, ought all ecclesiastical power to be exercised. Those who avail themselves of the possession of it, to oppress others,—or who exercise it with a view to the aggrandisement of their order,—or who seek, by means of it, to promote any selfish end—act a dishonourable part. They are unfaithful to the trust reposed in them.

Having thus pointed out the nature and defined the limits of the power, which church-government implies, the question now comes to be considered,—Who are the persons in whom the power of government has been lodged? Is it in the community of the faithful—the body of the people? or, Is it in a class of office-bearers appointed by Christ, for the purpose of bearing rule in his church? That this power of ecclesiastical government is not lodged in

the community of the faithful, the following considerations will show.

*First*, We find no mention made in Scripture of any such power being given by Christ to the body of the people. I have already shown that Christ is the fountain from which this power is derived. All power is in him—and it can be exercised only by those to whom he is pleased to grant it. We find him giving a special grant of this power to his apostles, when he said, “Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven;” Matt. xviii. 18. We find him afterward renewing the grant to the apostles, with an implied promise that it would be continued to those who should succeed them in the work of the ministry:—“All power is given me in heaven and in earth—go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world;” Matt. xxviii. 18–20. Here Christ institutes a christian ministry, which was to continue till the end of the world; and he promises them his gracious presence to assist and

direct them in their work. But we find not a single passage in which mention is made of any power being conferred upon the bulk of the people, either to preach or to rule. To them Christ has not given the keys, either of doctrine or of government.

*Secondly*, It is obvious, from mention being made of diversified gifts in the church, that Christ never intended that all should rule. It is expressly declared, that all have not the gifts necessary to fit them for ruling :—"To one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom ; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit ; to another faith by the same Spirit ; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit ; to another the working of miracles ; to another prophecy," &c. ; 1 Cor. xii. 8-10. We are told in the same chapter (verse 28), that, according to this diversity of gifts, " God hath set *some* in the church, first, apostles ; secondarily, prophets ; thirdly, teachers ; after that miracles ; then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." Then it is asked (verse 29), " Are all apostles ? are all prophets ? are all teachers ? are all workers of miracles ? "—clearly intimating that all are not apostles—all are not prophets—all are not teachers—all are not workers of miracles. Why ? Because we have already been told, that *all* have not the



gifts necessary to qualify them for occupying these offices. Upon the very same principle, and with the same force of reasoning, it may be affirmed, that all are not "governments," or rulers: because all have not the qualifications necessary to fit them for this work. "If a man know not how to rule his own house," he cannot (says Paul) be a ruler in the house of God. Likewise he says, if a person be a "novice," he ought not to be a ruler in the church, "lest being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil."<sup>1</sup> These passages plainly intimate, that the gifts, necessary to fit all the members of a congregation for being rulers, have not been conferred by the head of the church. It is, therefore, a legitimate inference, that he did not design that all should rule.

*Thirdly,* The directions given by the apostles to the members of the primitive churches clearly show, that, so far from all being invested with the power of government, the great majority of them were in subjection. I am not aware of a single direction being given to the members of these churches, generally, as to the manner in which they were to rule. On the supposition of all being invested with the

<sup>1</sup> 1 Tim. iii. 5, 6.



power of government, this must appear to be a singular omission. On the other hand, we find a distinction made between the rulers and the other members of the churches; and we find frequent injunctions given to the latter, as to the manner in which they were to conduct themselves toward the former. They were commanded to remember them and to follow their faith—to obey them and to submit themselves—to know them and to esteem them highly in love for their work's sake.<sup>1</sup> They were further commanded to honour them,—and to some (namely, those that ruled well) they were to give double honour.<sup>2</sup> Such directions as these given to the primitive churches, are totally at variance with the supposition, that all the members were equally invested with the power of government.

In the *fourth* place, If in each congregation, all the members have the power of ruling, then the question presents itself, Whom are they to obey? According to the doctrine which I am combating, all rule, and yet they are commanded to obey. Obey whom? The only answer that can be given to this question, on the supposition that *all* rule, is that they are to obey themselves. If this be not a

<sup>1</sup> Heb. xiii. 7, 17; 1 Thess. v. 12, 13.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Tim. v. 17.

contradiction in terms, it sounds very like one : To speak of all ruling and all obeying—ruling themselves and obeying themselves. I do not see, how such a conclusion, as this (absurd though it be) can be avoided, if we are to receive the doctrine, that all the members of the churches are invested equally with the power of government. They would, according to this supposition, have the double character of rulers and subjects.

In the *fifth* place, To avoid this incongruity, it may be affirmed, that though the power of government is lodged in the body of the people, yet this power may be delegated by them to office-bearers, whom they appoint to rule over them ; and that, on the ground of this delegated authority, they may yield them subjection—or they may rule in conjunction with them. If the members rule in conjunction with the office-bearers, this supposition does not remove the incongruity now stated. For it supposes them still to be rulers, possessing a joint authority with their office-bearers—and the question still reverts, Whom are they to obey? Again, if they consider their office-bearers as receiving a delegated authority from them, and as entitled to subjection from them on this ground,—I answer, that the New Testament recognises no such authority as this,

namely, an authority exercised by the office-bearers, which has been delegated to them by their fellow-men. The apostle Paul, as we have already seen, expressly mentions that the authority, which he and his fellow-labourers exercised in the government of the church, was given them *by Christ*. He reminds the churches, that their rulers were over them “in the Lord.” He styles them *Christ’s* ministers—*God’s* stewards—and he speaks of them as watching for souls, “as they that must give an account.” This account they must render not to men, but to Christ, who has counted them to be faithful, putting them into the ministry. Members of the church have the privilege (and a very valuable one it is) of choosing those who are to take the oversight of them. But the call, given by the people to their office-bearers, does not confer any *authority* either to preach or to rule. This authority is conferred by their being ordained, in the name of Christ, by those whom Christ has appointed to perform this solemn act, namely, the presbytery or eldership.

In the *sixth* place, We find no instance, mentioned in the New Testament, of the people acting as rulers in the church. As there is no precept authorising them to perform any act of ecclesiastical government, so neither is there any instance recorded of

their having done so. The doctrine, which ascribes the power of government to the members of the church generally, is as destitute of support from scripture example, as it is from scripture precept. The case of the incestuous person, mentioned in the fifth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians, has been quoted by writers on this subject as confirmatory of the opinion of those who maintain, that in the primitive church all the members were invested with equal power, in the administering of discipline, as well as in performing other acts of government. An attentive consideration of this case will show that it does not countenance any such doctrine.

As it is stated, in the Acts of the Apostles, that the apostles "ordained them elders in every church," it can scarcely be questioned that there were elders in the church of Corinth. In the epistles, which Paul wrote to this church, the elders must be considered as addressed, as well as the other members of the church. In that part of the first epistle, to which a reference has been made (the 5th chapter), he calls the attention of the office-bearers and of the members generally to a case of grievous delinquency, which had been tolerated amongst them, namely, that of a person who had been guilty of incest.

Those persons, to whom the matter belonged, had not taken any steps for maintaining the discipline of the church, by having this person cut off from their communion : “ Ye are puffed (said the apostle) and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you.” What is the direction, which Paul gives, in reference to this distressing case? Does he call upon them to hold a church meeting, for the purpose of investigating the scandal? No : There was no necessity for this. The scandal was flagrant. They were sufficiently acquainted both with the nature and with the truth of it. Does he require the members of the church to sit in judgment upon the offending individual, and to determine whether any—or what censure should be inflicted on him? No. He tells them that this was a matter concerning which he, as an apostle, had already determined. “ I, verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, *have judged already*, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed.” Why, then, does he write to them at all about it? He writes to them simply for the purpose of informing them what his decision was—and in what way he wished it to be carried into effect. His decision was, that the person, who had been guilty of such a heinous sin, should be

cut off from the communion of the church; and he commands that this decision should be solemnly and *publicly* carried into effect, as a sentence ratified by Christ himself, the great Head of the church. “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my Spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” By whom are we to suppose this sentence to be carried into effect, in the presence of the congregation? By none other than the office-bearers of the church. Some one or other of those, who were over them in the Lord, would publicly intimate the sentence in the midst of the assembled people—and would declare the offending individual cut off from the communion of the church, agreeably to the command given by the apostle.

There is certainly nothing in this case that can be regarded as furnishing a precedent for acts of government being performed by the people. For the members of the church of Corinth bore no farther part in the administration of the discipline, that is here described, than is borne by the members of any presbyterian congregation, when they are assembled to witness the administration of a public rebuke to an offending individual, who has been previously dealt

with, by the session, and who has been suspended by them from the enjoyment of his privileges, as a member of the church. In the one case, as well as in the other, the sentence has been pronounced independent of the people : and in the one case, as well as in the other, the people are assembled to witness the sentence being carried into effect, agreeably to the apostolic injunction—"Them that sin rebuke before all, that others may fear." The people further are to be considered as acquiescing in the sentence pronounced upon their offending brother, and as giving him their sympathy and their prayers—thereby exemplifying the beautiful comparison, which the apostle of the Gentiles employs, when he says—"Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it."<sup>1</sup>

Should it be objected to the view, which I have given of this case, that the apostle addresses the members of the church of Corinth, as persons who did judge in the church, when he says (ver. 12.) "Do ye not judge them that are within?"—I answer, that he shows us, in the beginning of the following chapter, in what sense he affirms, that they judged

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. xii. 26.



those that are within. He there gives us to understand, that it is in the same sense, as it is affirmed of the saints that they shall judge the world—and even judge angels.—“Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?” (chap. vi. 2, 3.) Surely, no one will affirm that the saints shall judge the world, or judge angels, *in person*. They shall judge them in the sense of being assessors along with Christ, acquiescing in the sentences which he shall pronounce upon men and devils. *In the same sense* are we to understand the apostle’s language, when he speaks of the members of the church of Corinth judging “them that are within.” Their judging was nothing else than their acting as assessors, along with the office-bearers of the church, by acquiescing in the sentences which they pronounced. This is obviously the meaning, which he affixes to his own language, when he speaks of the saints judging the world: and the rules of just criticism demand, that when he speaks of the saints judging in the church, the same interpretation be put upon his words in the one case, as in the other. What I have already stated will suffice to explain



the meaning of the apostle's language, when referring to this case in his second epistle to the same church, he says (chap. ii. 6), "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment<sup>1</sup> which was inflicted of many."<sup>2</sup> The act of cutting off the incestuous person from the communion of the church had been done publicly, agreeably to the sentence of the apostle ; and if ALL did not approve of it (as was likely to be the case, in a church so much divided as that of Corinth) it had been acquiesced in, at least by the majority.

There is another passage that will require to be noticed in connexion with this branch of the subject, as it has been frequently appealed to by those who contend that the power of government is lodged, not in any class of office-bearers, but in the body of the people. The passage referred to is Matt. xviii. 15-17, "Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone : if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church : but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto

<sup>1</sup> *επιτιμὴ* Censure.

<sup>2</sup> *ὑπο τῶν πλείονων* By the majority.

thee as an heathen man and a publican." The Saviour is here giving directions to his disciples, as to the manner in which they were to act toward persons who were guilty of sins, which at first were not publicly known. The person, offended by the conduct of the erring brother, was to go and tell him his fault in private, without divulging it to others. He was to endeavour to convince him of his sin, and to bring him to repentance on account of it. If he succeeded—his brother *was gained*; and nothing more was to be done concerning him. If he did not succeed in the private interview—if the offending brother remained obstinate and impenitent, notwithstanding all the arguments and entreaties addressed to him, the person offended was to take one or two more along with him, and in their presence to state what had given him offence—also to renew the attempt to bring to a sense of guilt, and to a penitent state of mind, the brother who had gone astray. If the offender listened to the remonstrances addressed to him in this conference, and if he expressed contrition, the case was settled: no farther publicity was to be given to it. But if the offender remained obstinate, if he would not acknowledge his fault nor express penitence, when dealt with in private by the brethren, then, says the Saviour—"Tell it to the

church.”<sup>1</sup> Now the question here naturally occurs—What meaning would our Lord’s disciples attach to the word *ἐκκλησια*—rendered by our translators *church*? Suppose that one of them—soon after listening to the statement recorded in these verses—had given offence to another, and after being dealt with, in the manner pointed out, had refused to make any acknowledgment of his sin—*where* would the person offended go to “tell” the offence? To what assembly (*ἐκκλησια*) would he apply? It is to be borne in mind that, at this period, the christian church was not organised—and that the only religious assemblies, with which the disciples were acquainted, were those of the temple and the synagogue. It is probable that they understood their Master as referring to the latter of these, namely, the meeting of the synagogue, when he said, “Tell it to the Assembly.” For though they were Christ’s disciples, they were as yet members of the Jewish church; and, as such, they were connected with the synagogue. It was not till some time after this, that they were brought to entertain the belief, that the Jewish ritual was to be abolished—and a simpler form of religion instituted in its place. The synagogue was the religious assembly,

<sup>1</sup> εἶπε τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ.

with which they were most familiar. It was the one which they were accustomed statedly to attend upon the Sabbath. Christ himself taught regularly in the synagogue. "I ever taught in the synagogue"—was his language in the presence of Annas the high priest.<sup>1</sup> That the disciples were members of the Jewish synagogue and were enjoying the privileges connected with its fellowship, at the time Christ addressed to them the words on which I am now commenting, is evident from a statement contained in the address, which he delivered to them on the night before he suffered—when preparing them to encounter persecution for the sake of the gospel, he said, "They shall put you out of the synagogues"<sup>2</sup>—which declaration plainly implies, that they were not yet cast out. They were still permitted to enjoy their privileges, as members of the Jewish church.

Seeing, then, this was the only church with which they were acquainted—and the only one which had as yet been formed—what more natural for them, when they heard their Master giving them directions about the manner of treating an offending brother, and bidding them tell his conduct to the assembly, than to understand him as referring to the meeting

<sup>1</sup> John xviii. 20.

<sup>2</sup> John xvi. 2.

of the synagogue. That Christ did refer to the congregation of the Jewish synagogue, is the opinion of Lightfoot and other learned men. On the supposition that this opinion is correct, the Saviour's language cannot be considered as giving any countenance to the doctrine of those who maintain, that the administering of discipline belongs to the body of the congregation. For in every Jewish synagogue there were rulers, by whom all the affairs connected with the synagogue were administered. Frequent mention is made in the New Testament, of these rulers.<sup>1</sup> There was one who presided over the rest, and who, in Scripture, is called "the chief ruler of the synagogue."<sup>2</sup> These rulers were called "elders;" and they were set apart to their office by the imposition of hands. The number of them varied in each synagogue: there were never fewer than three—and sometimes they amounted to a considerable number, according to the size of the congregation. The whole administration of discipline was in their hands. The people were present, to hear the law read and to join in the worship of God; but they had no share in the government. To the elders it belonged to receive persons into fellowship—to judge of offences—to

<sup>1</sup> Mark v. 22; Acts xiii. 15.

<sup>2</sup> ἀρχισυνάγωγος.

censure, and to excommunicate.<sup>1</sup> On the supposition that Christ referred to the Jewish synagogue, when he said to his disciples, "Tell it to the church," the investigation of the scandal would be made, and judgment would be pronounced—not by the people—but by the rulers; though the people might be present to witness the proceedings, and might, by their acquiescence, homologate the decision pronounced.

But whatever opinion may be formed with regard to the primary application of Christ's words—or with regard to the meaning which the disciples at first attached to them—there can be little doubt that they were chiefly designed by the Saviour to furnish to his followers a rule of discipline to be observed in the christian church, so soon as it should be fully organised—and to be adhered to in all future ages. On this point, commentators seem to be generally agreed. Fully coinciding in this opinion, I consider it a fair interpretation of the word "*ἐκκλησία*" in this passage, to view it as descriptive of a *christian* assembly—an assembly of professing Christians. In this sense, the term is generally, though not always,

<sup>1</sup> Those who wish to be more particularly acquainted with the various arrangements and forms of the Jewish synagogue, can consult Lightfoot, Vitringa, Seldon, Thorndyke, and other writers on the subject.

to be understood in the New Testament. I am aware, that some limit the term in this place to an assembly of office-bearers, and consider it as equivalent to the word *Session*, or *Presbytery*. Others extend the meaning of it to all the members of a worshipping society, and consider it as equivalent to the word *Congregation*. This latter meaning is the one which, after a careful examination of the authorities on both sides, I am inclined to adopt. But the question occurs,—what kind of congregation does it denote?—not certainly a congregation *without rulers*; but a congregation consisting of two classes of persons, namely, the private members and the elders. The scriptural proof, in support of this statement, I shall afterwards more fully adduce. At present, I would merely mention the fact recorded in the Acts (chap. xiv. 23), that the apostles “ordained them elders in every church.”<sup>1</sup> And I would also refer to the exhortation which the apostle James gives in his epistle to the twelve tribes, when he says (chap. v. 14), “Is any sick among you: let him call for the elders of the church,”—thereby plainly intimating, that there were elders in every church, whom the sick might call for.

When the Saviour, then, directs his disciples to

<sup>1</sup> κατ' ἐκκλησίας.



tell the case of an offending brother to the church, or assembly, it does not necessarily follow from this direction, that the members of the church, as a body, were to sit in judgment upon the case, and administer censure. If the assembly were one, in which no persons were appointed to bear rule, it might be a legitimate enough conclusion, that the members generally were to judge. But seeing express mention is made, in the New Testament, of a class of persons being ordained *in every church*, for the purpose of administering discipline, and superintending the affairs of the congregation, the fair inference to be deduced from the Saviour's language is, that the case is to be made publicly known to the church, with the view of its being brought under the consideration of those whose official duty it is to judge in these matters. They are to hear the parties—to examine witnesses—and to give judgment: and seeing they are the authorised organs, by whom the church acts in cases of discipline, so, whatever is done by them in reference to such cases, may with sufficient propriety be said to be done by the church: exactly on the same principle as a nation is said to do what is done by its parliament, or a town is said to do what is done by its corporation. Nothing is more common than to speak of “the proceedings of the church,”



or “the decisions of the church”—when, by such phraseology, we understand the proceedings and decisions of the ecclesiastical rulers.

This is the phraseology employed in the passage, which has given occasion to these remarks; and the Saviour, in employing it, knew that he would not be misunderstood—as the Jews were not unaccustomed to such a mode of speech. In the writings of the Old Testament, a variety of instances occur of a similar kind. Compare Exodus xii. 3 with what is stated in the 21st verse of the same chapter. In the former of these verses, the congregation or church is said to do what, is affirmed in the latter, to be done by the elders. What is stated of the congregation in Numbers xxxv. 24, and Joshua xx. 6, is affirmed of the elders in Deut. xix. 12, and Joshua xx. 4. Other instances of a similar kind, might be adduced from the Old Testament. These, now quoted, bear directly upon the subject of the present discussion, as they tend to illustrate the phraseology employed by the Saviour under consideration.

As a farther confirmation of the view which I have given of this passage, I would notice the promise which the Saviour gives to his apostles in the 18th verse of the same chapter (Matt. xviii.), “Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind

on earth shall be bound in heaven ; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Here Christ gives to *all* the apostles the same promise, which he had previously given to Peter (Matt. xvi. 19). It is a promise of ratifying in heaven whatever sentence they might pronounce upon earth. This promise the Saviour renewed to them after he rose from the dead :—" He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost : Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them ; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." John xx. 22, 23. Such declarations as these, which Christ addressed to his apostles, have usually been regarded by expositors, as furnishing a divine warrant for the administration of discipline by ecclesiastical office-bearers. They contain in them authority, given by Christ to those who bear rule in his church, both to inflict censure and to remove it : and the ground on which he promises to ratify their sentences, is, that they are his ministers ; they act in his name, and by virtue of his commission. " God (says Paul) hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation : Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ ;" 2 Cor. v. 19, 20. " I know (says Gillespie) a private Christian, may, and ought to convince an impenitent brother, and to comfort a repenting brother, *ex*

*charitate christiana* : But the Scripture doth not say, that God hath committed to every private Christian the word of reconciliation, and that all Christians are ambassadors for Christ, nor is there a promise to ratify in heaven the convictions or comforts given by a private Christian : No more than a king doth engage himself *in verbo principis* to pardon such as any of his good subjects shall pardon, or to condemn such as any of his good subjects shall condemn : But a king engageth himself to ratify what his ambassadors, commissioners or ministers shall do in his name, and according to the commission which he hath given them, to pardon or condemn.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, that it is the office-bearers who are to judge in the matter that is brought before the church,—that it is *their* sentence that is despised by the person who neglects to hear the church,—and that it is on the ground of despising their sentence, he is to be cut off from the communion of the church (to be “as an heathen man and a publican”)—derives a strong confirmation from the promise contained in the 18th verse, to which a reference has been made, and also from the form of address which the Saviour employs in giving the promise. If it had been the members

<sup>1</sup> Aaron's Rod Blossoming, p. 412.

of the church generally, who were to judge in the case which Christ supposes ; if the matter were to be finally determined by their sentence, we would naturally have expected that, in assigning the reason why their sentence was to be binding, he would have used such language as the following : “ Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever *they* shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven ; and whatsoever *they* shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” But this is not the form of his address. He addresses himself directly to those whom he had appointed to be office-bearers in his church, and he says, “ Whatsoever *ye* shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven ; and whatsoever *ye* shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,”—thereby intimating that the office-bearers alone were invested with authority to judge and determine in matters brought before the church. He had given them a commission to do so ; and so long as they acted in accordance with the commission which they had received, the sentences which they should pronounce—both in binding and loosing—would be ratified by him in heaven.

The object of the remarks, which I have made on Matt. xviii. 15-17, is to show that this passage does not afford a sufficient foundation for the structure, which Independents have attempted to rear upon it,

namely, that church power is lodged—not in any class of office-bearers appointed to rule—but in the body of the people. I trust that I have succeeded in showing, that it admits of an interpretation which, while it is fully warranted by the phraseology employed, is also in strict accordance with the principles of presbyterianism. It may give additional weight to the remarks, which I have made on this part of the subject, to adduce, in confirmation of them, the authority of an eminently learned and pious congregationalist, Dr John Owen. While this divine pleads hard for congregational churches, and rejects the notion of a church being either diocesan, provincial, or national, yet he sturdily maintains, that the authoritative rule or government of the church, is in the elders of it. According to him, “a church in its complete state consists of pastors, or a pastor and elders, who are its guides and rulers, and the community of the faithful under their rule.”<sup>1</sup> “No society, (he says,) that doth not congregate; the whole body whereof doth not meet together, to act its powers and duties, is a church, or may be so called, whatever other sort of body or corporation it may be. In this sense is the word

<sup>1</sup> Enquiry into the Original, &c. of Evangelical Churches, p. 61.

used, when the first intimation is given of an evangelical church state, with order and discipline : Matt. xviii. 17, If he shall neglect to hear thee, tell the church, &c.”<sup>1</sup> So that, according to Dr Owen, the *ἐκκλησία* or *church*, mentioned in Matt. xviii. 17, is a “society consisting of pastors, or a pastor and elders, who are its guides and rulers, and the community of the faithful under their rule.” As the “authoritative rule” is in these “guides and rulers,” so it is a fair inference from his language, that by these “guides and rulers” the case of discipline, referred to by the Saviour, is to be judged of and determined. The language which he employs on this subject, in another part of the same work, is very decided. Referring to a charge brought against him by Dr Stillingfleet, in a controversial treatise, he says, “He (Dr S.) intimates both here and afterwards, that my judgment is that the government of the church was democratical, and the power of it in the people in distinction from its officers ; which is a great mistake ; I never thought, I never wrote any such thing. I do believe that the authoritative rule or government of the church, was, is, and ought to be in the elders and rulers of it, being an act of the

<sup>1</sup> Enquiry into the Original, &c. of Evangelical Churches, p. 71.

office power committed unto them by Christ himself.”<sup>1</sup> This language is sufficiently explicit ; and shows what were the views entertained on the point, which I have been discussing, by a congregationalist who was no less distinguished for his learning than for his piety.

<sup>1</sup> Preface to the Enquiry, &c. p. 5.

## CHAPTER III.

Office-bearers appointed by God—Extraordinary office-bearers—Ordinary office-bearers—Jewish eldership—Christian eldership—Persons appointed to rule in the church—Scriptural arguments in support of this position—Argument first, The fact is plainly and unequivocally stated, that elders were ordained by the apostles in every church—Argument second, It appears evident from the New Testament that every church had a *plurality* of elders—Argument third, The elders mentioned in the New Testament were appointed for the purpose of *overseeing* the church—Argument fourth, We find a variety of titles given to elders expressive of their being possessed of authority—Argument fifth, The eldership is mentioned in the New Testament as a distinct office, and the qualifications for this office are minutely pointed out—Argument sixth, Special directions are given as to the manner in which the duties of the eldership are to be performed—Argument seventh, Members of the church are instructed in the duty which they owe to their spiritual rulers.

I HAVE in the preceding chapter adduced a variety of considerations from Scripture to show, that the power of government in the church is not lodged in the community of the faithful. So far as scripture precept or scripture example goes, there is no authority given to the body of the people to administer discipline, or to perform any act of ecclesiastical rule. The object of the statements, which I shall



make in this chapter, shall be to show that there are office-bearers, appointed by Christ, to bear rule in his church ; and that to them it belongs to administer those laws which he has laid down for the government of that spiritual community of which he is the Head.

In the New Testament we find mention made of various classes of office-bearers, such as—"apostles"—"prophets"—"evangelists"—"pastors and teachers"—"helps"—"governments." With regard to the first three mentioned in this enumeration, all are agreed that they were extraordinary—designed to be only of temporary continuance in the church. The special work assigned them was that of organising the christian church—giving it body and shape, according to the directions which they themselves received from Christ. It is in reference to this work in which they were employed, that the apostle Paul makes use of such language as the following, when, speaking of those who had been called to the fellowship of the church, he says—"And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone."<sup>1</sup> After having executed the commission given them by their divine

<sup>1</sup> Eph. ii. 20.

Master, it was no longer necessary that such extraordinary office-bearers should be continued in the church. The work, for the performance of which extraordinary powers had been conferred upon them, was done. They retired from the scene—and left the work of evangelising the world to be carried on by the ordinary office-bearers of the church.

The other office-bearers mentioned in the above enumeration (“pastors” and “teachers”—“helps”—“governments”), are those which Christ has designed to be of permanent continuance. Though there are some who make a distinction between the *pastors* and *teachers*, and consider them as descriptive of two different offices, yet I coincide in the opinion of those who regard them as descriptive of the same class of office-bearers—and this class is the elders who labour in word and doctrine. The “governments” are the elders that merely rule: and expositors are generally agreed in regarding “helps” as descriptive of the deacons, who are so designated on account of their being assistants to the eldership, by relieving them of the burden connected with the administration of the funds of the church. According to the view thus given, the *pastors*, *teachers*, and *governments*, are all included under the general designation of *elders*: and this accords with the historical statements con-

tained in the New Testament, where we find mention made of only two classes of persons who were ordained by the apostles to offices in the christian church ; those who were ordained to the office of the eldership—and those who were ordained to the office of the deacon. With regard to those who were ordained to the latter of these offices, they were not invested with any spiritual authority. They were not appointed to rule—but simply to attend to the distribution of the church's bounty—and were themselves subject to the government of the elders. I shall make their office the subject of consideration in a subsequent portion of this work. In the meantime I shall confine the attention of my readers to the office of the eldership, as constituting the main subject of this treatise.

The office of the elder was one with which the Jews were familiar from the earliest period of their history. Even before the departure of the Hebrews out of Egypt, mention is made of “ the elders of Israel ;” *Exod. iv. 29, and xii. 21.* During the course of the Old Testament history, they are frequently introduced to our notice ; and to show that they were a distinct class from the civil rulers, they are generally mentioned in connexion with the rulers and judges and officers. *Josh. xxiii. 2 ; 2 Kings x. 1 ; Ezra x. 14.* From the last of these

passages we learn that there were elders and judges in every city ; and they are mentioned, the one class as distinct from the other. These elders were the ecclesiastical rulers of the people. After the return of the Jews from their captivity in Babylon, there were synagogues erected in the various towns and villages, throughout the land ; and connected with each of these synagogues there was a certain number of elders, who conducted the worship of God and exercised ecclesiastical authority over the members of the congregation. In addition to these subordinate elderships, that were in every city,—there was a supreme ecclesiastical council that exercised a general superintendence over the affairs of the Jewish church. This council held its sittings in Jerusalem—the metropolis—and was composed of priests and elders and scribes. Frequent mention is made of it, in the gospel narrative, as being violently opposed to Christ—and as being mainly instrumental in procuring his condemnation.<sup>1</sup> In the 22d chapter of Luke, 6th verse, and also in the 22d chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, 5th verse, this council is called *πρεσβυτεριον*, the *presbytery*, or *eldership*, which is the very name given by Paul

<sup>1</sup> Matt. xvi. 21, and xxi. 23, and xxvi. 57-59, and xxvii. 1-12 ; Lev. xxii. 66.

to the assembly of church officers that ordained Timothy. 1 Tim. iv. 14.

It is the opinion of many learned men, that the apostles, in modelling the christian church, adopted as their pattern the forms and institutions that obtained in the Jewish synagogue.<sup>1</sup> Other writers, of equal learning, have keenly opposed this opinion. "The assertion of some (says Dr Owen) that the apostles took their pattern for the state and rule of the churches, and as unto divers rites of worship, from the synagogues of the Jews, their institutions, orders, and rules, not those appointed by Moses, but such as themselves had found out and ordained, is both temerarious and untrue."—"Wherein there is a real coincidence between what was ordained by the apostles, and what was practised by the Jews, it is in things which the light of nature and the general rules of Scripture do direct unto: And it is dishonourable unto the apostles, and the Spirit of Christ in them, to think, or say, that in such things they took their pattern from the Jews, or made them their example."<sup>2</sup> Without presuming to decide in a

<sup>1</sup> See a list of authors quoted on this subject, by Dr Samuel Millar, of Princeton, in his work on the Eldership, pp. 25-33.

<sup>2</sup> Enquiry into the Original, &c. of Evangelical Churches, pp. 36, 37.

matter where men of such eminence have differed, I am at least warranted by the evidence of Scripture history in affirming, that the apostles, acting under the authority of Christ, did institute in the christian church an eldership corresponding, in many particulars, to that which had existed for a long period in the Jewish Church: The following particulars concerning this institution,—gleaned from the pages of the New Testament—I shall lay before my readers, that they may see what evidence there is, of its having existed in the primitive church—what is the authority under which those, who are invested with the office of the eldership, act—what are the powers which they are permitted to exercise—and what is the subjection which the members of the church owe to them.

*First*, The fact is plainly and unequivocally stated, that elders were ordained by the apostles in every church: Acts xiv. 23, “ And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.” I do not mean to enter into the controversy which has been carried on concerning the meaning of the term in the original (Χειροτονησαντες) here rendered “ *when they had ordained.*” This is not necessary: For it matters

not, as to the object I have in view, in quoting this verse, whether we understand the Greek word to express the election of the elders by the holding up of the hands of the people, or their ordination, by the laying on of the hands of the apostles, or whether—when taken in connexion with the rest of the verse—it may be considered as intended to express (according to the interpretation of some) both the election and the ordination. I quote this verse simply for the purpose of showing, that under the superintendence, and by the appointment of the apostles, there were persons set apart to the office of the eldership in *every church*.

Further, it appears, from the directions given by Paul to Titus, that the organisation of a church was incomplete without the appointment of elders; for, in his epistle to that evangelist he says, “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city as I had appointed thee;” Tit. i. 5. Here it is declared by the apostle, that there were some things “wanting” in the churches of Crete; and among the number of these things that were wanting, he specially mentions the ordination of elders. Before he had left the island, he had given injunctions to Titus, to have them ordained in *every*

*city.* He reminds him of this, by adding these words at the close of the verse—" *as I had appointed thee.*" According to the authority of Paul, a church is incomplete, which has no elders ordained in it. This is one of the things which he describes as "wanting," and which he enjoins Titus to "set in order."

*Secondly,* It appears evident from the New Testament, that every church had a *plurality* of elders. I am not aware of any church being mentioned, as having only a single elder. We read of the *elders* connected with the church at Jerusalem—of the *elders* of the church of Ephesus—of the *elders* of those churches that were in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythinia. We read of the *overseers* (*elders*) of the church at Philippi—and of *them* that bore rule in the church of Thessalonica. The reason of this was, that as by virtue of their office they were invested with authority, so they were to rule *conjointly*. We do not read of any one elder exercising authority over the rest. They were united, as a body, in the government of that portion of the church of Christ committed to their charge. From the fact, now mentioned, of there being a plurality of elders ordained in every church, two things are evident. First, that no church ought to be without office-bearers appointed to bear rule



in it; and, secondly, that there ought to be no single ruler in any one church, managing its affairs according to his own dictation.

*Thirdly*, The elders, mentioned in the New Testament, were appointed for the purpose of *overseeing* the church. This was the work to which, as elders, they were solemnly set apart, namely, superintending the affairs of the churches with which they were severally connected. Hence the title *overseers*, or *bishops*, by which they are so frequently designated in the New Testament. For the sake of those who may not be acquainted with the original language, in which the New Testament was written, it may be proper to state that the word *bishop* is a Greek term in an English dress, and that when translated into the English language, the literal meaning of it is *overseer*. It may be proper further to state, that the elders are the persons to whom the sacred penmen refer, when they speak of bishops or overseers as an office in the church. In proof of this statement I adduce the following instances: The writer of the Acts of the Apostles informs us, that when Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, he sent from Miletus to Ephesus and called the elders of the church; and these elders he addressed in the following language—"Take heed to yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the

Holy Ghost hath made you overseers ;” Acts xx. 28. The word in the original (ἐπισκοπους) here rendered “overseers,” is the same as that which is ordinarily translated “bishops ;” and this term Paul applies to the elders of the church of Ephesus. The same apostle, writing to Titus, says—in a passage to which I have already referred—“For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee. If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, not accused of riot, or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God ;” Chap. i. 5–7. Here the word “bishop” (or overseer) refers to those whom the apostle has previously designated by the title “elders.” Peter, addressing himself to “the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythinia,” says—“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder”—“Feed the flock which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly.”<sup>1</sup> The term in the original, rendered “taking the oversight thereof,” is ἐπισκοπουντες—literally *overseeing* or *episcopising*. This is what these

<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter v. 1, 2.

elders were to do ; they were to act the part of overseers of the flock—and this they were to do “not by constraint, but willingly.” Paul, in his epistle to the Philippians, addresses himself to all the saints which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons”<sup>1</sup>—meaning, by the “bishops,” the elders or overseers of the church. These instances, now quoted, clearly show us that the term *elder* is to be regarded as synonymous with that of *bishop* or *overseer*, and we hence see what is the special purpose for which this class of office-bearers has been appointed ; it is that they may superintend the affairs of the house of God—that they may watch over the people—and, by the faithful administration of discipline, maintain order and purity in the church.

It were unsuitable here to enter on any formal discussion, of the subject of diocesan episcopacy, for the purpose of showing that it has no foundation in the word of God. I may, however, be permitted to remark, that comparatively few of those who plead for that form of ecclesiastical government, do so on the ground of any authority which they have for it from the New Testament. They rest their support of it chiefly on arguments drawn from the

<sup>1</sup> Phil. i. 1.

writings of the fathers. Such of them as do refer to the writings of the New Testament—as furnishing authority for this form of episcopacy—tell us that they have, if not apostolical precept, at least apostolical example, for it; and they point to the cases of Timothy and Titus—the former of whom (they say) was appointed by Paul to act as bishop in the church of Ephesus—and the latter was commissioned to act as bishop in the island of Crete—with full powers to ordain elders and to superintend the affairs of their respective dioceses. These are mere gratuitous assertions. There is no proof that Timothy ever was a bishop at Ephesus; and if he were a bishop, he was not a diocesan one: for mention is made of other persons who acted as overseers (or bishops) in that church.<sup>1</sup> The direction given by Paul to Timothy, while he abode at Ephesus, was to do the work, not of a bishop, but of an “evangelist;”<sup>2</sup> and it appears, that his stay in that city was only to be temporary; for Paul directs him to come *shortly to him* at Rome.<sup>3</sup> The same remarks are applicable to Titus. There is no proof of his being stationed, as a bishop, in the island of Crete. On the contrary, any information given concerning him leads us to the conclusion, that

<sup>1</sup> Acts xxii. 28.<sup>2</sup> 2 Tim. iv. 5.<sup>3</sup> 2 Tim. iv. 9.

he was left by Paul in that island only for a short period, to do a particular work; namely, to set in order the things that were wanting, and to ordain elders in every city: And after having accomplished this work, he was to leave Crete, and join Paul at Nicopolis, where the apostle says he had “determined to winter.”<sup>1</sup>

I would further remark, that ecclesiastical historians—even those that are favourable to episcopacy—and many distinguished divines of the Church of England, admit the truth of what I have been endeavouring to establish, namely, the identity of elders with those who are called overseers or bishops in the New Testament. Mosheim, in his account of the first century, says—“The rulers of the church were called either presbyters (elders) or bishops, which two titles are, in the New Testament, *undoubtedly applied to the same order of men.*”<sup>2</sup> Milner, in his account of the same century, says—“At first indeed, or for some time, church governors were only of two ranks, presbyters (elders) and deacons: At least, this appears to have been the case in particular instances, as at Philippi and at Ephesus; and the term bishop was confounded with that of presbyter (elder).”<sup>3</sup> “In a celebrated work,” says Dr Dwight

<sup>1</sup> Titus iii. 12.    <sup>2</sup> Vol. i. p. 29. Glasg. ed.    <sup>3</sup> Vol. i. p. 161.

in his *System of Theology* (vol. ii. p. 478), “called ‘The Institution of a Christian Man,’ approved expressly by Archbishop Cranmer, Bishops Jewell, Willet, and Stillingfleet, and the main body of the English clergy, together with the king and parliament, is this declaration : ‘In the New Testament there is no mention made of any other degrees, but of deacons or ministers, and of presbyters or bishops.’”

In a quotation, made by the same writer, from a production of Dr Holland, King’s Professor of Divinity at Oxford, it is stated, that “to affirm the office of bishop to be different from that of presbyter, and superior to it, is most false ; contrary to Scripture, to the Fathers, to the doctrines of the Church of England, yea, to the very schoolmen themselves.” In a letter written to Sir Francis Knollys, by Dr Reynolds, Professor of Divinity at Oxford, we have the following decided expression of opinion,—“All that have laboured in reforming the church for 500 years have taught that all pastors, be they entitled bishops or priests, have equal authority and power by God’s word ; as first the Waldenses, next Marsilius Patavinus, then Wickliffe and his scholars, afterwards Husse and the Hussites ; and last of all, Luther, Calvin, Brentius, Bullinger, and Musculus. Among ourselves we have bishops, the Queen’s Professors of

Divinity in our universities, and other learned men consenting herein, as Bradford, Lambert, Jewel, Pilkington, Humphreys, Fulke, &c. But what do I speak of particular persons? It is the common judgment of the reformed churches of Helvetia, Savoy, France, Scotland, Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Low Countries, and our own.”<sup>1</sup> Many other authorities, of a similar kind, might be quoted in confirmation of the same point. But sufficient evidence has been adduced to show that the only episcopacy, which is recognised in the New Testament, is that of the eldership.

*Fourthly*, We find a variety of titles given to elders in the New Testament, expressive of their being possessed of authority; and the source, whence this authority is derived, is also pointed out. I have already shown, that it is to them the title, *overseer* (ἐπισκοπος) is applied. Another of the titles given to them is that of *governor* (ἡγούμενος).<sup>2</sup> To show that this is a title descriptive of authority, I refer my readers to Matt. ii. 6, where the title is applied to Christ, as a governor. “And thou Bethlehem in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a *governor* (ἡγου-

<sup>1</sup> Neale's History of the Puritans. Vol. i. p. 497.

<sup>2</sup> Heb. xiii. 7, 17, 24.

μενος) that shall rule my people Israel.” The word ἡγεμων, which is of similar import, is repeatedly applied by writers of the New Testament to civil rulers.<sup>1</sup>

Another title, by which elders are designated, is that of *shepherd* or *pastor*. The apostle Peter, addressing elders in the 5th chapter of his 1st Epistle, says to them,—“Feed (ποιμανατε) the flock of God :” or, as the Greek word properly signifies, “act the part of shepherds” toward them. Paul addresses a similar exhortation to the elders of the church of Ephesus : “Take heed (he says) unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed (ποιμανειν) the church of God ;” Acts xx. 28. *Feeding* the flock is only one part of the shepherd’s duty : *Ruling* them is another, and an equally important part of it. Accordingly, we find this term employed to describe the rule, which Christ as a governor exercises over the church. It is so employed in the text, quoted above, Matt. ii. 6 : “For out of thee shall come a governor, *that shall rule* (ποιμανει) my people Israel.”

Another of the titles applied to elders is that of προεστως or προΐσταμενος, which signifies a *president* or *ruler*. This title is applied to them, Rom. xii. 8 ;

<sup>1</sup> Acts xxiii. 24, 26, 33 ; 1 Pet. ii. 14



1 Thess. v. 12; 1 Tim. v. 17. The same term is employed by Paul, to denote the rule which a person bears over his own family: 1 Tim. iii. 5. And by classical authors, it is applied to the rulers of cities and of kingdoms.

Another title given to elders is that of *steward*: "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God;" 1 Cor. iv. 1. "A bishop (or overseer) must be blameless, as the steward of God;" Tit. i. 7. A steward (*οικονομος*) is a person invested with authority to rule either in a family, or a city. We find instances of the application of the term in both of these senses. Paul, in his Epistle to the Galatians, says (ch. iv. 1, 2), "Now, I say, that the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; but is under tutors and governors (*οικονομους*) until the time appointed of the father." Erastus is mentioned (Rom. xvi. 23) as being steward (*οικονομος*) or chamberlain of the city of Corinth. When elders, then, are described as *stewards of God*, this certainly implies that they are invested with authority to rule in the house of God.

All those titles, which I have now mentioned, are applied by the sacred writers to persons who were invested with the office of the eldership. If language

have any meaning at all, such titles indicate, that those to whom they were applied were invested with authority to act as rulers. The *kind* of authority which they exercised—and the *source* whence they derived it—are pointed out, with sufficient clearness, by such expressions as the following—“Stewards of God”—“Them that have the rule over you *in the Lord*”—“The flock over which *the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers*.” I know not what plainer language could be employed to describe the spiritual nature and the divine source of that authority, with which these office-bearers in the christian church are invested.

*Fifthly*, The eldership is mentioned, in the New Testament, as a distinct office ; and the qualifications which those, who are invested with this office, ought to possess, are minutely pointed out. In the beginning of the 3d chapter of the 1st Epistle to Timothy, it is stated to be a true saying, that “if a man desire the *office* of a bishop, he desireth a good work.” Having already established, on good grounds, the identity of the title of *elder* with that of *bishop* or overseer, I consider the verse now quoted as furnishing direct proof, that there has been instituted in the christian church such an office as that of the eldership. Then, in the same chapter—as well as in the 1st chapter of

the Epistle to Titus—the qualifications, which those who are invested with this office ought to possess, are minutely pointed out. What need would there be for pointing out so minutely these qualifications—and for commanding them to be made known to Christians every where—if there be no office in the christian church to which they are applicable ?

*Sixthly*, Special directions are given by the Spirit of God, as to the manner in which the duties connected with the office of the eldership are to be performed—and encouragements are given to those, who are invested with this office, to be faithful and diligent in the performance of these duties. Elders are exhorted to rule with diligence : Rom. xii. 8. They are not to prefer one before another, nor to do any thing by partiality : 1 Tim. v. 21. A heretic, after the first and second admonition, they are to reject : Titus iii. 10. They are not to be lords over God's heritage, but ensamples to the flock : 1 Peter v. 3. Such directions as these *presuppose* the existence of a class of office-bearers appointed to bear rule in the house of God. Those persons, to whom these directions are applicable, are mentioned as a class distinct from the flock—and as exercising authority over it. On any other supposition, than this, they are utterly unintelligible. To encourage those who

are invested with this office, to be faithful in discharging the duties connected with it, Christ promises that he will be with them, till the end of the world, to direct and assist them: And to those of them who are faithful, there is an assurance given, that “When the chief Shepherd shall appear, they shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away;” 1 Peter v. 4. Such encouragements as these are specially addressed to those who are entrusted with the oversight of the flock. If God had not instituted any such office as that of an overseer in his church—and if he had not given authority to those, who are invested with this office, to rule—would such encouragements have been addressed to persons presuming to exercise an authority, which he had not sanctioned? We have no reason to think that they would.

*Finally,* The scriptural authority of the office of the eldership may be further argued from those passages, that occur in the writings of the apostles, where members of the church are instructed in the duty which they owe to their spiritual rulers. When we read in Scripture the injunctions, that are given to children to obey their parents,—or those that are given to servants to be obedient to their masters—we justly infer from these injunctions, that the

authority which a parent exercises over his children, and that which a master exercises over his servants, is an authority which God has sanctioned : and to refuse obedience either in the one case, or the other, is to resist the ordinance of God. This argument applies with equal force to the divine authority of the eldership. The injunctions, which we find the apostles giving to the members of the primitive churches, to love, honour, and obey those that exercised a spiritual superintendence over them, are as plain and pointed as any that were addressed by them either to children, or to servants.

The following are some of the injunctions, given by the apostles to the primitive churches, concerning the duty that they owed to their office-bearers :—  
“ We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you ; and to esteem them very highly in love for their works’ sake ;” 1 Thess. v. 12, 13. The word *know*, in this passage, does not mean simple knowledge ; but knowledge *with approbation*. In this sense the term is used in the 6th verse of the 1st Psalm, where it is said, “ The Lord knoweth (that is, *approves of*) the way of the righteous.” The Thessalonians, then, were to regard with a feeling of approbation those that laboured among them and

were over them in the Lord. The phrase in the original, which is translated “over you in the Lord,” is a very energetic one—*προισταμενους ὑμῶν ἐν Κυρίῳ*, “your rulers in the Lord.” These spiritual rulers they were to esteem highly—*very* highly. Nay, they were to esteem them very highly *in love*: and this they were to do *for their works’ sake*.

Paul, writing to Timothy, says—“Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in word and doctrine;” 1 Tim. v. 17. Concerning this passage it may be remarked, that it is obviously implied in it, that *ruling* is the work of all the elders—and that in their capacity, *as rulers*, they are to be honoured by the people. It is further implied, that some are more active and diligent in ruling than others: these (says the apostle) are to receive *double* honour; especially, if in addition, to ruling, they also labour in word and doctrine. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives the following exhortation, to the members of the church (chap. xiii. 17), “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account.” In this passage, also, ruling is mentioned as the work of elders; and the spiritual nature of their work, as rulers, is pointed out—it is *watching*

*for souls*—watching to promote their spiritual benefit. The apostle assigns this as the reason, why those who reap the benefit of their labours ought to obey them, and to submit themselves. It may be remarked, that the term in the original, which is employed in this verse to express submission (ὑπεικετε) is one of peculiar force. It is derived from a word, which signifies “to yield;” but the addition of the preposition ὑπο gives intensity to the original meaning; so that it implies *yielding without repugnance*. It is a term which is employed to express that unresisting obedience which soldiers yield to their commanders. Stronger language than that, which the Spirit of God employs on this subject, it is scarcely possible to find. The reason of such forcible language being employed might be,—that the Spirit foresaw the resistance which men, under the influence of those proud feelings that naturally exist in the human heart, would be inclined to make to the exercise of that spiritual authority, which God has committed to the office-bearers of his church.

The propositions, which I have endeavoured to establish in this chapter, by arguments from Scripture, are—that at the commencement of Christianity, elders were appointed, under the inspection of the apostles, in *every* church—that in no one church do

we read of there being only a single elder ; but in all of them a plurality of elders were ordained—that they were appointed for the purpose of *overseeing* the churches—that the titles given them are such as indicate their being possessed of authority—that the qualifications, which those who are appointed to this office ought to possess, are distinctly pointed out—that directions are given them by the Spirit of God, as to the manner in which they are to discharge the duties of their office—that strong encouragements are held out to them, to be faithful and diligent in the performance of these duties—and, finally, that the members of the church are enjoined by God, in forcible language, to love, to honour and obey their spiritual rulers. The conclusion, which I deduce from these propositions, is, that the institution of the eldership in the christian church is a divine ordinance, and that to uphold it in a state of purity and efficiency is a duty incumbent on all the professed followers of Christ.



## CHAPTER IV.

Ruling elders—A distinct class from the teaching elders—  
Presumptive proof of this—Direct evidence—Rom. xii. 8—  
1 Cor. xii. 28, 29—1 Tim. v. 17—These passages examined—  
Objections answered—Reflections suggested by the evidence  
—Opinion of Dr Owen concerning the eldership.

SOME, after perusing what has been written in the preceding pages, may possibly be ready to say—  
“You have not established your point. What you are required to prove is, not that there were office-bearers in the primitive church, who were called elders—and who exercised spiritual authority in the churches; for we admit that there were elders ordained in all the churches—but these elders were persons who both taught and ruled. We do not find any distinction made between the teaching and the ruling elder. What we desiderate, is proof that there were persons ordained to the office of the eldership who merely ruled, while they did not teach; and until you establish this point by satisfactory evidence, we must reject the office of the ruling elder as unscriptural.”

Such sentiments as these some of my readers may be ready to express—and the demand which they make is not unreasonable. It is but fair that proof be given, that we are warranted by Scripture in having in our churches not only elders who both teach and rule—but elders who merely rule, while they do not teach. It is to the establishing of this point that I shall devote this chapter.

Before adducing those passages of Scripture in which the office of the ruling elder—as distinct from that of the teaching elder—is expressly mentioned, I would recall the attention of the reader to a fact, which has been already stated, that in every church there was a plurality of elders ordained. We have no reason to think, that all the churches were so numerous as to require a plurality of teachers. This might be the case with those which had been formed in the large towns : but with regard to such as had been formed in the villages and rural districts, we may reasonably conclude, that they would in general be so small, as not to require the labours of more than one teacher. Yet the smallest of them had a *plurality* of elders. The supposition is at least probable, that some of these elders were appointed merely to rule. In the fact of there being a plurality of elders in every church, we are furnished with a

presumptive proof of there being in each a class of office-bearers corresponding with that of the ruling elders, which obtains among the presbyterian churches of the present day. We must either admit this supposition to be correct, or admit that none of the churches amongst us are adhering to the apostolical order—as they do not act upon the principle of having a plurality of *teaching* elders. Even the very largest of them—whether they be presbyterian, independent, or episcopalian—deem it sufficient to have only one. In very rare cases, have they two or more.

If we admit that all the elders, ordained in the primitive churches, were such as laboured in word and doctrine—and if we further admit that there was a plurality of such elders ordained in every church, I cannot see how the conclusion can be avoided, that we are bound to follow the example set us in this respect by the apostles, and to have in every separate congregation—whether it be great or small—a plurality of teaching elders. It could scarcely be expected that these teachers, in very many cases, could be supported by their congregations; for there is a considerable difficulty experienced by many of the congregations, as at present constituted, in supporting *one* teaching elder: and as for supporting two or three of them, this would be, in not a

few cases, impracticable. The consequence would be that they would be under the necessity of labouring with their hands, in order to support themselves. In this case, how could they comply with the apostolic injunction, "Give thyself wholly to these things." Compliance with this injunction would be not only morally, but physically impossible. They must neglect their ministry, as they could not reasonably be expected to devote their whole time and attention to it—and at the same time prosecute some manual employment, with a view to obtain for themselves and families the necessaries of life. Who does not see that such a mode of procedure would at least greatly impair—if it did not totally destroy—the efficiency of the christian ministry? Yet all this follows, as a necessary consequence, from supposing that all the elders in the primitive churches were such as laboured in word and doctrine. I argue, therefore, from the fact of there being a plurality of elders in every church, the strong probability that at least a certain portion belonged to that class denominated *ruling elders*.

We are not, however, left to inferential evidence on this subject. There are several passages of Scripture in which the office of the ruling elder is mentioned as distinct from that of the teaching elder:

so that we have direct scriptural authority for the maintenance of this office in the christian church. The first passage, which I adduce in confirmation of this point, is Rom. xii. 4-8. "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office; so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness." In this passage, the church is compared to the human body. As the members of the human body have different functions to perform, so the members of the church have different gifts conferred—and each is to exercise, for the good of the whole, the particular gift which God has given. He that has the gift of prophecy, is to exercise it (says the apostle) according to the analogy (*κατα την αναλογιαν*) of faith. He that has the office of a deacon (*διακονιαν*) is to do the work of a deacon. He that is appointed to teach, is to attend to his teaching. He that has the gift of ex-

hortation, is to exercise his gift. He that is appointed to distribute, (ὁ μεταδιδους,) is to do it in simplicity, or singleness (ἐν ἁπλοτητι), that is, without respect of persons. He whose office it is to rule, (ὁ προϊσταμενος,) is diligently to discharge the duties of it. He whose work is that of showing mercy—by attending upon the sick, (ὁ ἐλεων,) is to do it with cheerfulness.

In this enumeration of gifts and offices, the reader will observe, that “he that teacheth,” and “he that ruleth,” are mentioned as distinct. Both of these were office-bearers in the church—and both of them ruled. But the difference between them was this: The first, “he that teacheth,” (ὁ διδασκων,) not only ruled, but also laboured in word and doctrine; whereas the second, “he that ruleth,” had no other work assigned him but that of ruling—and he is distinguished by a title which marks the peculiar nature of his work. The expression ὁ προϊσταμενος, in its literal acceptation, denotes a person who stands before another; and metaphorically it is employed to denote a *ruler* or *commander*—one who is invested with authority over others. Sometimes it denotes the ruler of a family: 1 Tim. iii. 4, του ιδιου οικου καλως προϊσταμενον, “One that ruleth well his own house.” Sometimes it denotes the ruler of a city: μεγαλης

προεστως πολεως, "He that ruleth over a great city."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it denotes the ruler of a nation : *Αντιγονω προεστῶτι Μακεδονων*, "To Antigonus the ruler of the Macedonians."<sup>2</sup> It is, therefore, quite in accordance with the classical application of this word, to find it employed in the New Testament to denote those who bear rule in the church : such as in 1 Thess. v. 12, *προισταμενους ὑμων εν Κυριω*, "Your rulers in the Lord;" and in 1 Tim. v. 17, *οι καλως προεστῶτες πρεσβυτεροι*, "The elders that rule well." I am, therefore, fully justified in regarding it, in the passage on which I am commenting (Rom. xii. 8), as descriptive of an office-bearer in the church that rules—and of one that only rules.

Both Doddridge and Macknight translate it, in this passage, "one who presides" or "president." But this does not convey the full amount of its meaning here. A president may preside among equals. But this term is descriptive of one that bears rule over others; and it has been justly remarked, that if nothing more than a president had been meant by the apostle—the word employed would have been, not *προϊσταμενος*, but *πρωτοστατης*. The former of

<sup>1</sup> Plato, Epistle 7th, quoted by Gillespie in his *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, p. 271.

<sup>2</sup> Polyb. Hist. II. C. 45, quoted by Schleusner.

these implies “a power of jurisdiction and government”—the latter, “a precedence or placing of one before another,” though it is admitted that the two terms are sometimes used indiscriminately.<sup>1</sup> It is evident from this passage, that *teaching* and *ruling* are recognised as distinct gifts—and also that they are represented as exercised by different individuals; and there is here a direction given by the Spirit of God, as to the manner in which they were to exercise their gifts: “He that teacheth, let him wait on his teaching”—and “He that ruleth, let him do it with diligence.”

Let us suppose (what some affirm) that none are appointed to rule in the church, distinct from those who teach,—I ask, if, on this supposition, the language which the apostle employs be not fitted to mislead: first to say, “Let him that teacheth, wait on his teaching;” and then, as if addressing another class of persons, to say, “Let him that ruleth, do it with diligence”—when he did not mean to affirm, that there were persons who ruled, distinct from those that taught. Who would understand him as referring, in these phrases, to exactly the same class of individuals? I admit that teaching and ruling

<sup>1</sup> Aaron's Rod Blossoming, p. 271.



are united in the same person, in the case of the elder who labours in word and doctrine. But it is of the apostle's phraseology I am at present speaking. According to this phraseology, the apostle fixes our attention not only on teaching and ruling as distinct gifts, but on different individuals as exercising these gifts—"he that teacheth"—and "he that ruleth." I appeal to the common sense of my readers, if this phraseology does not naturally lead us to the conclusion, that there were persons appointed to rule, distinct from those who were appointed to teach. A sufficient reason may be assigned for the distinction, made in this passage, between the teaching and the ruling elder. It is, that the work of teaching is of such importance, that it requires the teaching elder to give his attention, if not exclusively, at least chiefly to it: He is to "*wait*" upon it. This being the case, he cannot be supposed to give to the work of ruling such a portion of his time and attention as its importance may demand; and the ruling elder, therefore, has been appointed to co-operate with him in this work, so that the government of the house of God may not be neglected—but every thing be "done decently and in order."

A second passage that may be adduced, to prove the distinction between the teaching and the ruling elder,

is 1 Cor. xii. 28, 29. “ And God hath set some in the church, first, apostles ; secondarily, prophets ; thirdly, teachers ; after that miracles ; then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles ? are all prophets ? are all teachers ? are all workers of miracles ? ” There is a great similarity in the circumstances in which the apostle introduces this passage, to those in which the passage, above quoted from the epistle to the Romans, is introduced. The introduction of both is prefaced by a comparison of the church of Christ to the human body. As there are different members in the body, which have different functions to perform, and as the due performance of each function is necessary to the good of the whole,—so in the church there are different office-bearers appointed, each endowed with gifts necessary to fit him for the right performance of the duties of his office ; and these gifts each is to exercise in such a manner as to promote the benefit of that spiritual community with which he is connected. It is for this purpose that God has appointed the various classes of office-bearers, enumerated in the passage now quoted. They have all been designed by God to promote one object (in subordination to his own glory), and that object is the edification of the church.

This passage contains the most complete enumeration of office-bearers that is to be found in the New Testament. They are all here mentioned (both extraordinary and ordinary) with the exception of the evangelist. Some have supposed that the pastor also is omitted. But this is not the case : as the office of the pastor is here virtually represented by that of the teacher ; seeing that these two terms (pastor and teacher) do not represent different offices—but rather different acts of the same office. Some of the office-bearers, mentioned in this enumeration, were extraordinary. They were designed for the more speedy and effectual propagation of the gospel at the commencement of Christianity ; and they were to be only of temporary continuance in the church. Of the eight mentioned in this passage, five were extraordinary ; and they are here pointed out by the following designations—apostles—prophets—miracles—gifts of healing—diversities of tongues : meaning by “miracles,” persons who wrought miracles ; by “gifts of healing,” persons who possessed these gifts ; and by “diversities of tongues,” persons who “spake with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” It may be remarked, in passing, that the higher of these included all the lower. The other three mentioned

were ordinary—and designed to be permanent in the church. These are designated by the following titles—teachers—governments—helps : meaning by “ governments,” persons who ruled (the abstract being put for the concrete); and by “ helps,” those who held the office of the deacon, who were so denominated on account of their giving assistance to the eldership in taking charge of the poor.

The meaning of the term in the original, here rendered *governments*, I formerly noticed. It describes the management of a ship by the pilot, when, by means of the rudder and the compass, he directs its course through the deep. The term, as here applied to the government of the church, is a very expressive one; inasmuch as it forcibly suggests to the mind, the idea of prudence and skill being necessary on the part of those who are entrusted with the management of her affairs. That by these “ governments” we are to understand rulers of some kind or another, there can be little doubt. But the question presents itself—What kind of rulers were they? Some have affirmed, that they were christian magistrates appointed to rule in the church. Those who make this affirmation forget, that the apostle is here speaking of office-bearers that were *then* in the church : for he says, “ God *hath* set in the church

governments.” But there were no magistrates bearing rule in the church—or rather, I should say, bearing rule over it—for some hundreds of years after this. Others have maintained, that they were prelatical bishops whose business it was to rule, not only over the flock, but over the pastors of the flock. I have already shown, that Scripture recognises no such rulers in the christian church—that there is no distinction made between the presbyter and the bishop, or,—to use still more familiar terms—between the elder and the overseer—that these terms are used indiscriminately in the apostolical writings, and are employed to describe the same class of office-bearers. These “governments” were none other than the ruling elders of the church. That they were *rulers*, the term itself implies. They were rulers *in the church*—of course office-bearers in it. They were rulers whom *God had set or appointed* (ἐθετο). Further, they were rulers whom God had set in the church, distinct from the teachers : Their business was merely to rule. All these particulars are clearly deducible from the passage under consideration ; and they indicate, with sufficient plainness, the office of the ruling elder, as it exists in the presbyterian churches. This then is an office which exists by a divine warrant.

When I speak of the “ governments ”—or rulers—as being distinct from the “ teachers,” I do not mean to affirm, that the teachers did not rule. Their office included in it the key of government, as well as the key of doctrine ; that is, they not only laboured in word and doctrine, but they also ruled. But what I affirm is, that there was a class of office-bearers whose sole work was that of ruling, and that this is the class which is specially described in this passage by the term “ governments.” Now, to show that this class of rulers was distinct from that of the teachers, I submit the following remarks. The apostle says, “ God hath set some in the church, first, apostles ; secondarily, prophets ; thirdly, teachers,” &c. According to the structure of this sentence, the word *some* is applicable to every clause in the verse ; and the meaning of the apostle is the same as if he had said, “ God hath set some in the church, first, who are apostles ; some in the church, secondarily, who are prophets ; some in the church, thirdly, who are teachers ; after that, some in the church who have the power of working miracles ;” and so on with the remaining clauses of the verse. That this is his meaning, is obvious from the questions which he asks in the following verses (29th and 30th), where he says—“ Are all apostles ? are

all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?" &c.—thereby plainly intimating, that all were not apostles—all were not prophets—all were not teachers—all were not workers of miracles, &c. Here is a proof, then, that the teachers were *a distinct class*; for if they had not been so, then *all* had been teachers—which the apostle affirms they were not. But if they were distinct, then they were a different class from the "governments." For if they had not been different—but one and the same—can we suppose that the apostle would have said—"God hath set in the church, thirdly, teachers; and after that governments." Who does not see that this language would be unmeaning—or, at least, a useless repetition, if the "teachers" and "governments" were identically the same? It would be equivalent to saying,—“God hath set in the church, thirdly, teachers;” and after that, “God hath set governments;”—meaning exactly the same class of persons. On this supposition, what possible meaning could we attach to the phrase “*after that*,” if he were merely going to repeat what he had previously affirmed? The argument from these verses, in favour of a distinction between the teaching and ruling elder, appears to be conclusive.

Another passage, in which the distinction between the teaching and the ruling elder is plainly taught,



is 1 Tim. v. 17. “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in word and doctrine.” There can be no doubt with regard to the class of office-bearers referred to in this passage. They are expressly called *elders* (πρεσβυτεροι); and to show us that this term is not applied to them in respect of their age, but in respect of their office, they are described as elders that *rule*, προεστωτες πρεσβυτεροι, literally, “ruling elders.” The meaning of the word προεστωτες will be found in the remarks which I have already made on Rom. xii. 8. I have there shown that the verb, to which it belongs, is ordinarily employed to denote the exercise of rule or authority over others. It is clear from the verse under consideration, that God stamps with his approbation, the office of the eldership in the christian church. For it is here implied, that *all* the elders are to receive honour, but they that rule well are to receive double honour. It is worthy of notice, that this passage fixes our attention upon *ruling* as the peculiar employment of the eldership; for all the elders rule. There is no comparison made in this verse between elders that rule, and elders that do not rule. The language employed, implies that all rule. But there is a comparison drawn between the ruling of some, and the ruling of



others. *As rulers*, they are distinguished by different degrees of excellence. Some rule well. Others are defective in their ruling : they are neither so faithful nor so diligent as they ought to be ; and the object of the Spirit of God, in the injunction here given, is to recommend to the special notice of the church those elders, that perform the duties of their office in an efficient manner, as persons that are entitled to receive double honour.

Suppose that this verse had contained nothing more than the injunction, expressed in the first clause of it, “ Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour ”—and that the latter part of it had been wanting altogether—the remarks that I have made would have sufficed for the interpretation of it. It could not have been ascertained, from the first part of the verse, that there was any distinction between elders that merely rule, and elders who, besides ruling, also teach. We might have inferred that there was such a distinction ; but we could not have affirmed that it was plainly taught. The statement, however, contained in the second part of the verse, places the matter beyond all reasonable doubt—“ especially they who labour in word and doctrine.” This addition to the verse would be altogether unmeaning, if there had been no ruling elders, distinct

from those that laboured in word and doctrine. If all had laboured in word and doctrine, there would have been no necessity for the apostle adding these words. It would have been sufficient for him to have said, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour." On the supposition that they were all teaching elders, this statement would have been sufficiently explicit: there could have been no mistake as to his meaning. Why then should he add these words—"especially they that labour in word and doctrine"—if there was no distinction among them? Was not such an addition as this calculated to mislead? Would not any person, reading these words, naturally conclude that there was a class of elders who, while they ruled, did not labour in word and doctrine,—seeing that they who laboured in word and doctrine were *especially* to receive double honour? According to the view I am combating, there was no speciality in the case. There were none *especially* entitled to receive double honour, on the ground of labouring in word and doctrine, seeing this was applicable to them all. Can we really attribute to the apostle such unmeaning language? What would we have said, if the verse had run in the following terms—"All the elders labour in word and doctrine. Let them that rule

well be counted worthy of double honour ; especially they who labour in word and doctrine.” Yet this is virtually the language, which the apostle is regarded as employing, by those who maintain that there are no ruling elders distinct from those that teach.

The word *especially* (μαλιστα), according to the common use of it, implies a distinction between one class and another. Should any one, for instance, in giving an account of a battle, say, “ All the soldiers fought well ; especially the infantry”—would we not understand him as intimating, that there were soldiers engaged in the battle, who were not infantry ? Or should any one tell us, that “ All the students in the university distinguished themselves ; especially the students of theology”—would we not understand by this declaration, that there were students in the university, besides those who were studying theology ? In like manner, when the apostle says, “ Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour ; especially they who labour in word and doctrine”—are we not equally warranted in interpreting this language to mean, that there were elders who ruled well, besides those who laboured in word and doctrine ?

This text has been found very difficult of interpretation by those who reject the office of the ruling

elder. It has been twisted into every possible shape. There is not a single term in it, that has not been subjected to a species of torture, with the view of making it speak a language different from its ordinary acceptation ; and all for the purpose of getting rid of the obnoxious doctrine of a ruling eldership. “ It would touch any man of bowels with commiseration (says Anderson in his Defence of Presbyterianism) to see into what various forms the episcopal writers twist themselves to avoid the force of the text last cited (1 Tim. v. 17). It has but fourteen words in the original, even particles included ; and they have put at least fourteen senses upon it. Dioclevius discussed ten of them in his days, and they have been ever since inventing new ones.”<sup>1</sup> I shall here notice some of the glosses that have been put upon this much controverted text.

*First*, It has been affirmed, that by the ruling elders referred to, in the first part of the verse, and who are distinguished from them that laboured in word and doctrine, the apostle meant the deacons. It is a sufficient reply to this view of the text to state, that the deacons are never styled elders in the New Testament—that the work of ruling is no where

<sup>1</sup> Anderson in Reply to Rhind, p. 177.

ascribed to them—and that they are mentioned in Rom. xii. 8, and in 1 Cor. xii. 28, as distinct both from the teaching and the ruling elders. They were designed to be *helps* to the eldership; and their proper work was to attend to the wants of the poor.

*Secondly*, It has been affirmed, that by the ruling elders, mentioned in the first part of the verse, are to be understood aged and infirm bishops, who cannot labour in word and doctrine. In reference to this interpretation, it may justly be asked—how can superannuated bishops, who are incapacitated by infirmity from labouring in word and doctrine, be supposed capable of ruling well?—which is the supposition made by the apostle. Further, according to this interpretation, it would follow, that preaching presbyters are entitled to receive greater honour, than bishops who do not preach; a doctrine which few prelates will be inclined to admit. A serious objection to this view of the verse is, that it supposes that aged and infirm ministers, who have been worn out in their Master's service, and who are no longer capable of preaching, are not entitled to receive the same honour as those who are young and vigorous, and fit for the active discharge of the duties of their office:—a supposition, which reason and religion alike condemn.

*Thirdly*, By the elders that rule well, some would have us to understand magistrates ; such as kings, members of parliament, and all civil governors. It is fatal to this interpretation, that at the time Paul wrote these words—and for a considerable period afterward — there were no magistrates connected with the christian church, to whom the language could apply. Further, it is the duties, not of civil, but of ecclesiastical rulers, that the apostle is describing in the epistle of which the verse forms a part. Besides, if this interpretation were admitted to be correct, it would follow from it, that ministers of the gospel would not only have an equal share in the government of the church with kings and parliament-men, but would be entitled to double honour on the ground of their labouring in word and doctrine. Such a conclusion as this Erastians would not be inclined to admit ; and yet it follows necessarily from their own interpretation of the verse. The interpretation, on the grounds now stated, must be regarded as untenable.

*Fourthly*, Some affirm, that the latter part of the verse is to be viewed as exegetical of the former. In order to support this view they tell us, that the Greek particle *μαλιστα*, instead of “*especially*,” should be translated *much* ; and the latter part of the verse

they read thus, "they who labour much in word and doctrine." This statement they consider as designed by the apostle to show who the elders are that rule well: They are those who labour much in word and doctrine: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour; they who labour much in word and doctrine." It is unfortunate for those who take this view of the verse, that a single instance cannot be adduced from the New Testament, where the word *μαλιστα* has the meaning which they attach to it. In so far as the use of it in the apostolical writings is concerned, it is never employed in an explanatory, but a disjunctive sense. The following instances may be quoted as a specimen. Titus, i. 10: "For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially (*μαλιστα*) they of the circumcision." The word *μαλιστα* here distinguishes vain talkers and deceivers of the circumcision from those that were not of the circumcision. Gal. vi. 10: "Let us do good unto all men, especially (*μαλιστα*) unto them who are of the household of faith." Here the word *μαλιστα* distinguishes those who believe from those who do not believe. Phil. iv. 22: "All the saints salute you, chiefly (*μαλιστα*) they that are of Cesar's household." Here the word *μαλιστα* makes a distinction between the saints that belonged to



Cesar's household and those that did not. But even admitting that the word *μαλιστα* has an exegetical rather than a distinctive meaning, yet, according to the Greek idiom, the interpretation which I am opposing would require a different construction of the words in the original from that which is actually employed. If the apostle had intended the latter part of the verse to be exegetical of the former, instead of saying *μαλιστα οἱ κοπιωντες*, he would have said *οἱ μαλιστα κοπιωντες*. This is on the supposition, that *μαλιστα* is to be understood in an exegetical, rather than a distinctive sense.

*Fifthly*, Some find a key to the meaning of this verse in the word *κοπιωντες*, which (they tell us) signifies *labouring to weariness* or *with great earnestness*. According to them, the apostle, in this verse, makes a distinction—not between teaching and ruling elders—but between those who labour abundantly in word and doctrine, and those whose labours are not so abundant; and they say that the former are especially to receive double honour. This is a begging of the question. It is *taking for granted*, that teaching is common to both classes of elders—and that the only question is with regard to the abundance of their labours; whereas it is *ruling*, and not teaching, that is mentioned as the common work of them both. It



would require a different construction of the verse, to render such an interpretation at all probable. The words—"they that labour in word and doctrine"—would require to be inserted before the word "especially;" and the verse would require to be read thus—"Let the elders who rule well, and who labour in word and doctrine well, be counted worthy of double honour; especially they who are exceedingly laborious in their ruling and preaching." Again, with regard to the meaning of the word *κοπιωντες*, it denotes nothing more than ordinary labour. When extraordinary labour is intended to be expressed, either a different term is employed, or some epithet is added to *κοπιαω*, to give it intensity. The following instances will show this: "We beseech you brethren to know them which labour (*κοπιωντας*) among you, and are over you in the Lord;" 1 Thess. v. 12.—"Salute Tryphena and Tryphosa, who labour (*κοπιωνσας*) in the Lord. Salute the beloved Persis who laboured much (*πολλα εκοπιασεν*) in the Lord;" Rom. xvi. 12.—"But I laboured more abundantly (*περισσοτερον εκοπιασα*) than they all;" 1 Cor. xv. 10.—If the apostle had intended in the verse under consideration to describe extraordinary labour, on the part of some ministers more than others, he would have employed a more expressive term than

κοπιωντες. He would in all probability have substituted in its room the word *μοχθουντες*, which denotes labour of such a severe kind as to produce exhaustion of strength. The following instances, used by the apostle himself, will show that the latter of these terms is much more expressive than the former : *εν κοπῳ και μοχθῳ* in labour and fatigue ; 2 Cor. xi. 27.—“ For ye remember, brethren, *τον κοπον ἡμων και τον μοχθον*, our labour and fatigue ;” 1 Thess. ii. 9. —It appears, therefore, to be untenable ground, which those persons occupy, who consider the apostle as pointing out the superior claims which those ministers have, who labour much in the gospel, over those who labour less.

*Sixthly*, I shall notice only another interpretation of this verse, given by those who are opposed to the office of the ruling elder, which is, that the apostle by “ double honour” here means *double maintenance* ; and, if so, it follows that all the elders are to receive maintenance—and that they who rule well are to have a double allowance given them. Those who give this interpretation infer from it, that none but teaching elders are referred to, in the verse, as it is supposed that none will plead for a maintenance being given to elders that merely rule. In reply to those who urge this interpretation against the office

of the ruling elder, I would state, that though the word *τίμη* frequently denotes a *reward* or *remuneration for labour*, yet it is also employed to denote *honour* and *respect*; and though the apostle, from the quotation which he makes in the 18th verse, may be considered as using the term in the sense of *remuneration*, as he there says—"The Scripture saith, 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn,' and 'the labourer is worthy of his reward'"—yet it does not necessarily follow that such is his meaning; because the quotation is introduced proverbially, for the purpose of showing, that every one is to receive what is his due, according to the situation which he occupies: honour to whom honour—maintenance to whom maintenance. This view of the quotation is as applicable to the giving of honour to the elders, as it is to the giving of maintenance.

But even admitting that it is of maintenance the apostle is speaking, when he says, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour," this does not at all affect the distinction made in the verse, between elders that merely rule, and those who, besides ruling, also labour in word and doctrine. That elders, whose time is occupied in superintending the affairs of the church, should be entitled to maintenance from the church, is not in itself unreasonable;

and there is nothing in it unscriptural. Upon the principle already stated, that "The labourer is worthy of his reward," the elders that rule well are entitled to double maintenance; especially they who labour in word and doctrine. It is true, that the church may not be able to give to all the elders a maintenance, even though they be entitled to it. It may be unable, sometimes, to give a suitable maintenance even to teaching elders: but still the obligation to do so, is not on that account removed. It matters little, therefore, what sense we attach to the word *τιμη*, in this verse; whether we understand it as implying *personal respect* or *maintenance*; it does not affect the argument, which the verse furnishes, in support of the office of the ruling elder. The distinction, so clearly drawn in this verse, between elders that merely rule, and elders who, besides ruling, labour in word and doctrine, remains untouched: for whether it be honour in the ordinary sense of the term, or maintenance, that is meant—the apostle says, that they who rule well are to be counted worthy of a double portion of it; and this is to be especially the case with those who labour in word and doctrine.

I have extended my remarks on this important verse, probably more than was necessary. But as it

furnishes a very clear and decisive proof in favour of the office of the ruling elder—as distinct from that of the teaching elder—and as much learning and ingenuity have been brought to bear upon it, for the purpose of destroying the proof which it furnishes—I thought it due to my subject, to enter somewhat minutely into the various objections, that have been urged against the commonly received interpretation of the verse.

Any one of the passages, which I have adduced in the course of this chapter, to show that there are elders appointed to rule in the christian church, distinct from those that are appointed to teach, is sufficient to establish the point. All of them taken together furnish a mass of evidence that is irresistibly strong. The office of the ruling elder possesses all the sacredness of a divine institution. It is not left to our option, whether we shall have it or not. To refuse to have it, is to reject an institution of Christ. A church is not properly organised without it. The example which the apostles set—the directions which they gave—the fact of there being elders ordained in all the primitive churches—the statement made, that these elders were appointed by the Holy Ghost—and the distinction, so frequently referred to, in the apostolical writings, between those that ruled and

those that taught—all of these particulars, to which the attention of the reader has been directed in the preceding pages, furnish an amount of proof, in favour of this office, which even a prejudiced mind must find it difficult to resist. The proof is as full as any reasonable person can demand. It is much fuller than that on which we rest our belief of the change of the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week: And with regard to those, who reject it as unsatisfactory, I know not what other evidence would be sufficient to reach conviction to their mind. The following remarks of Dr Owen—coming, as they do, from a staunch congregationalist and a person of great learning—are well fitted to impress the minds of those who may be sceptical on this subject. Referring to 1 Tim. v. 17, he says—“This is a text of uncontrollable evidence, if it had anything to conflict withal but prejudice and interest. A rational man who is unprejudiced, who never heard of the controversy about ruling elders, can hardly avoid an apprehension that there are two sorts of elders, some who labour in the word and doctrine, and some who do not do so. The truth is, it was interest and prejudice which first caused some learned men to strain their wits to find out evasions from the evidence of this testimony. Being found

out, some others of meaner abilities have been entangled by them. There are elders then in the church. There are, or ought to be so, in every church. With these elders the whole rule of the church is entrusted. All these, and only they, do rule in it.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> True Nature of a Gospel Church, chap. vii. p. 141, &c.

## CHAPTER V.

Christian Fathers—What degree of credit to be attached to their writings—Their testimony in favour of the eldership—Clemens Romanus—Ignatius—Polycarp—Justin Martyr—Irenæus—Tertullian—Origen—Ambrose—Jerome—The eldership retained among the Waldenses—Adopted by the Bohemian Brethren—Introduced by Calvin into the church of Geneva—Received generally by the reformed churches—The English Puritans in favour of it—The Independent party in the Westminster Assembly of Divines express their willingness to receive it—Testimonies from congregational writers in favour of ruling elders—Testimonies from episcopalian writers—Summary of evidence.

It is of importance to inquire whether the view, which I have given of the divine institution of the christian eldership, derives any confirmation from the state of things which existed in the church, during the early period of the christian era. Do we find any evidence, in the records of that period, confirmatory of the evidence which has been adduced on this subject from the writings of the New Testament? To this question an affirmative answer must be given. The testimony of the Christian Fathers, and especially of those that lived nearest to the time of the apostles, is strongly corroborative of the views which have been



advanced in the preceding pages. There is scarcely one of these Fathers that does not make repeated mention of the office of the eldership. They refer to it not merely as an office that existed among them, but as one that was sanctioned by the authority of Christ. They represent the elders as bearing rule in the church : and when speaking of the elderships of particular churches, they apply to them such designations as the following—"presbytery"—"sanhedrim"—"council of God."

In making an appeal to the Christian Fathers on such a subject as this, I do not do so for the purpose of supplying any defect in the evidence of Scripture ; for though not a single portion of the writings of the Fathers had come down to us, the evidence which scripture furnishes would not have been weakened in the slightest degree. I do not consider, that the circumstance of any doctrine being taught in the writings of the Fathers, entitles it to be received by us, unless it can be shown to be in accordance with what is taught in the word of God. The conduct of those persons, who exalt the writings of uninspired men to a level with the inspired volume, and who make the former the rule of their faith as well as the latter, cannot be condemned in language sufficiently strong. It is an insult offered to the eternal Spirit.

It opens a wide door to the introduction of every species of error and abuse into the church. We have a melancholy instance of the mischievous effects that result from such conduct, in the attempt that is making by men of learning, in the present day, to sap the very foundations of Christianity through an undue importance attached to the writings of the Fathers. I do not wish either to detract from the merit of these writings, or to give them an undue importance. Though a suspicion has been cast upon the whole, in consequence of its having been ascertained that some of them are spurious, and that others of them are sadly corrupted by means of interpolations, introduced to serve the purposes of a party, yet they are not to be discarded as altogether worthless ; neither are we to set them down as productions to which no degree of credit is to be attached. There are to be found among them some valuable remains of antiquity ; and much light is thrown, by means of them, on the state of the christian church, as it existed at the close of the apostolic era. By means of these writings also, we are enabled to trace the successive changes that took place in the forms of worship, in the discipline, and doctrines of the church, in proportion as we recede from the time of the apostles, until the light of true Christianity became almost

totally extinguished. Those portions of them, which I shall quote at present, have generally been admitted to be genuine ; and the use which I intend making of them, is simply to ascertain the fact, whether the office of the eldership was received as an institution of Christ in the churches that existed in the early ages of the christian era—and whether the exercise of spiritual authority was connected with the office during these ages, as it was during the time of the apostles. If it shall be found that this was the case, then certainly it gives additional weight to the arguments already employed, to find that those who lived nearest to the time of the apostles—and who therefore may be supposed to be best acquainted with the form of government which these good men (acting in the name and by the authority of Christ) instituted in the church—conducted the administration of ecclesiastical affairs by means of elders. Concerning a matter of fact of this kind, those, who lived at that early period, must be allowed to be competent judges. Like any other fact recorded in ecclesiastical history, there is no other way by which the certainty of it can be ascertained, but by examining the evidence of those who lived and wrote during the ages that are more immediately referred to.

I remark, then, that the testimony of the early

Fathers is almost unanimous (if not wholly so) on this point. So far as I have had an opportunity of examining their writings—or been furnished with the means of judging of them, by extracts found in the productions of the learned—there is scarcely one of them that does not make mention of the eldership, as the form of government which existed in the churches at that period ; and the language which they employ, when referring to the eldership, is such as clearly expresses their belief in it as a divine institution. I shall make a selection of testimonies on this subject, from the writings of those whose names rank high in the early annals of the christian church—some of whom are said to have received instructions from the apostles, and at last sealed their testimony with their blood.

The first extract, which I make, is from the writings of Clemens Romanus. He was co-temporary with the apostles. Paul mentions him (Phil. iv. 3.) as one of his “fellow labourers whose names are in the book of life.” His Epistle to the Corinthians was written before the close of the first century. Some date it as early as between the years 64 and 70.<sup>1</sup> Milner says of this epistle, that “it was read

<sup>1</sup> Dr Wake as quoted by Anderson in his reply to Rhind.

in many primitive churches, and was admired exceedingly by the ancients. It has a simplicity and a plainness, not easily relished by a systematic modern; but there belongs to it, also, a wonderful depth of holiness and wisdom.”<sup>1</sup> Dr Owen remarks concerning it—“ For the substance of it, it is such as every way becomes a person of an apostolical spirit, consonant unto the style and writings of the apostles themselves; a precious jewel, and just representation of the state and order of the church in those days.”<sup>2</sup>

In this epistle, Clemens says—“ The apostles preaching through countries and cities, appointed their first-fruits bishops (overseers) and deacons of those who should believe, proving them by the spirit.” He here employs the same phraseology, as Paul does in the beginning of the epistle to the Philippians, calling the elders by their well-known designation of “ overseers.” In another place he says,—“ The apostles knew by our Lord Jesus Christ, that there should be a strife concerning the name of the episcopacy. For which cause having received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those that have been before mentioned, and afterwards gave the name, that, should they sleep, other

<sup>1</sup> Milner's Church History, vol. i. p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> Inquiry into the Original, &c., of Evangelical Churches, p. 89.

approved men might receive the ministry." He then mentions that "it is no small sin to reject those who have discharged the duties of the episcopacy holily and without blame:" And to show who these persons are, he afterwards adds—"Happy are those elders (*πρεσβυτεροι*) who having completed their mortal course, have obtained a fruitful and perfect dissolution; for they do not fear lest any one should remove them from the place appointed to them." In concluding the epistle, he says—"Ye, then, who laid the first foundation of the sedition, be subject to the elders, and be instructed to repentance; and bending the knees of your heart, learn to be in subjection."<sup>1</sup> From this epistle of Clemens the following things are deducible. 1. That there were only two classes of office-bearers in the christian church—"overseers and deacons"—the same as mentioned by the apostles. 2. That the people had no right to depose their elders; for the members of the church of Corinth are charged with ecclesiastical sedition in having deposed theirs. 3. That they who had done this were exhorted to return to their duty—and to submit to their elders. 4. If the people had no right to depose the elders, there must have been a tribunal

<sup>1</sup> Epistle of Clemens Romanus to the church of Corinth, pp. 54, 57, 58, 73.

that had the power of doing so: otherwise there would have been no remedy for mal-administration on the part of the rulers. We are led, therefore, to infer the existence of a presbytery in which such power was lodged.

Next in order to Clemens is Ignatius. Ecclesiastical historians mention Ignatius as having been ordained at Antioch in the year 70.<sup>1</sup> The early part of his history, therefore, must have been coeval with that of some of the apostles. He suffered martyrdom, according to Milner, in the year 107. Seven epistles, written by him on his journey to Rome (where he suffered), are admitted to be genuine. Six of these letters were addressed by him to the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna—and one to Polycarp. In these epistles we find such expressions as the following—"Reverence the elders as the council (or sanedrim) of God."—"Being subject to the bishop as the command of God, and in like manner to the eldership (*τω πρεσβυτεριω*)." Trall. § 3 and 13. Speaking of one Sotion, who was a deacon, he says,—"Whom I enjoy, because he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the eldership

<sup>1</sup> Milner's Hist., vol. i. p. 152.



as to the law of Christ." In the same epistle he says, "I beseech you, study to do all things in the harmony of God, with the bishop presiding in the place of God, and the elders in the place of the council (or sanedrim) of the apostles."—"Let nothing be in you that may divide you, but be one with the bishop and those that preside over you. As therefore our Lord Jesus Christ did nothing without his Father, neither by himself nor by the apostles, so do ye nothing without the bishop and elders. Magnes. § 2, 6, 7, 8. "That ye may be obedient to the bishop and to the eldership with an undivided mind." Ephes. § 20.

Toward the close of the first century, the person who presided in the meetings of the elders, was termed "the angel;"—a title borrowed from the Jewish synagogue. At the period when Ignatius wrote his epistles (which, Milner says, was the year 107), the same person was designated "the overseer" or "bishop." Ignatius is the first writer, who makes a distinction, between the bishop and the elders. But the bishop, of whom he writes, was nothing more than the presiding minister. He preached and administered the ordinances in a particular church. He also exercised a spiritual jurisdiction over the members of that church, along with



the elders, whom Ignatius calls *συνεδριον θεου*, "the council of God." This *συνεδριον* corresponded with what is now termed the "Session" or "Consistory;" and the person, who was designated "the bishop," possessed no other powers and performed no other duties, than those which are now possessed and performed by the officiating minister of a presbyterian congregation. The epistles of Ignatius clearly show that this was the case in his time. But after that period, the bishop began to usurp powers which he did not originally possess. He claimed a rank superior to that of the elders; and he came, step by step, to exercise jurisdiction over them as well as over the people.

Polycarp may be regarded as nearly cotemporary with Ignatius. The early part of his history runs also coeval with that of some of the apostles. He was for a long period overseer of the church at Smyrna; and is supposed to have been the "angel" of that church, addressed in the book of Revelation.<sup>1</sup> An epistle, written by him to the church at Philippi, has been preserved. In the title of this epistle, he speaks of the *elders* that were in the church at Smyrna; for he couples them along with himself in

<sup>1</sup> Milner, vol. i. p. 210.

the following manner—"Polycarp and the elders who are with him, to the church that sojourns at Philippi." In the epistle, he exhorts the Philippians to be subject to their elders and deacons. He mentions only two classes of office-bearers, the same as Paul mentions in his epistle to the same church: only, those whom Paul calls bishops or overseers, Polycarp calls *elders*—thereby pointing out these titles to be applicable to the same class of persons. Then to show us that the elders ruled in the church at Philippi, he gives the following directions as to the manner in which they were to act—"Let the elders be tender and merciful, compassionate toward all, reducing those that are in error, visiting all those that are weak, not negligent of the widow and the orphan, and him that is poor; but ever providing what is honest in the sight of God and men; abstaining from all wrath, respect of persons, and unrighteous judgment; being far from covetousness, not hastily believing a report against any man, not rigid in judgment, knowing that we are all faulty, and obnoxious to judgment."<sup>1</sup>

The same state of things, which I have described as prevailing in the time of Ignatius, prevailed also

<sup>1</sup> Epistle to the Philippians by Polycarp, § 5, as quoted by King in his Constitution of the Primitive Church.

in the time of Justin Martyr. This eminent individual published, about the year 140, his celebrated Apology for the Christians—addressed to Antoninus Pius. In this document, he gives an account of the christian assemblies, and of the order that obtained in them; and he mentions only two classes of office-bearers that belonged to the congregations. The first class he designates *προεστωτες*, “rulers,” which is the same title that is applied to the elders in 1 Tim. v. 17: the second class he calls *διακονοι*, “deacons.” In each assembly, there was one who presided over the brethren, whom he styles *προεστω των αδελφων*, “president of the brethren.” This person prayed and preached, and consecrated the sacramental elements—which the deacons distributed among those who were present, and carried to those who were absent.<sup>1</sup>

Irenæus, who presided over the church at Lyons, was a disciple of Polycarp. He wrote his book against heresies about the year 180. This work is characterised by Mosheim, “as one of the most precious monuments of ancient erudition.”<sup>2</sup> The following extract from it will show, that in the time

<sup>1</sup> Owen's Inquiry, &c., p. 109; Anderson's Defence, &c., p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> Mosheim's Eccles. Hist. Cent. ii. chap. 2d. § 5.

of Irenæus there were elders connected with the church. Speaking of wicked elders, he says—“Who indeed are believed to be elders by many. But they serve their own lusts, and do not keep the fear of God in their hearts, but treat others with reproaches, and are elated with the dignity of the principal session, and do wicked deeds in secret and say, ‘No one seeth us.’ They are condemned by the word. \* \* \* From all such we ought to stand aloof, but to adhere to those who (as we before mentioned) keep the doctrine of the apostles, and who exhibit sound speech and inoffensive conduct, with presbyterial order for the information and correction of others. \* \* \* Such elders the church nourishes, of whom the prophet says, ‘I will give thy princes in peace and thy bishops in righteousness.’”<sup>1</sup> From this passage, it appears that elders and bishops were regarded by Irenæus as identically the same:—“Such *elders*,” he says, “the church nourishes *of whom* the prophet saith, I will give thy *bishops* in righteousness.” Between the elders, however, in his day, there was a distinction similar to what existed in the time of the apostles, and similar to what exists still. Some were teaching

<sup>1</sup> Irenæus Advers. Hær., lib. iv. cap. 44.

elders—and others merely ruled. This distinction is referred to, in the passage now quoted, by what is there stated as to “the dignity of the principal session;”—by which expression we are to understand the dignity connected with those who both taught and ruled. There were some who were unduly elated with this dignity, and who, in consequence of it, aspired to superiority over the elders that merely ruled. These latter were not in possession of “the dignity of the principal session.”

Tertullian, who flourished toward the close of the second, and at the beginning of the third, century, mentions in his Apology, that when assemblies of the Christians were held for administering discipline, “approved elders” presided. He says—“Judgment is given with great weight, as among those who are sure of God’s eye upon them; and it is a high foretoken of the future judgment, if any one has so offended as to be banished from the communion of the prayer and of the assembly, and of all holy commerce. *Approved elders* (probati seniores) also preside, who have obtained this honour not by price, but by testimony,” &c.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Opera Tertulliani, p. 709.

Origen wrote his work against Celsus in the early part of the third century. Speaking, in this work, of the manner in which Christians admitted persons into their communion, he states that there were some appointed to examine the lives and morals of applicants for admission, that they might exclude from their society such as were guilty of forbidden actions.<sup>1</sup>

Ambrose flourished in the fourth century. The following passage from his writings bears decided testimony to the existence of the office of the ruling elder in the early period of the christian church. "By reason of the honourableness of age, the elder is to be provoked to a good work with meekness, that he may more easily receive the admonition. For he that is admonished may be afraid lest afterward he should be corrected, which is disgraceful to the elder: For even among all nations old age is honourable. Whence both the synagogue, and afterwards the church, had elders, without whose counsel nothing was done in the church. Which thing by what negligence it grew out of use, I know not, unless perhaps through the teachers' slothfulness, or rather haughtiness, while they alone would

<sup>1</sup> Contra Celsum, lib. iii. p. 142.

be thought somewhat.”<sup>1</sup> At the time that Ambrose wrote these words, the practice of having elders in the church was growing into disuse; and to show that they were *ruling* elders to whom he refers, he distinguishes them from the teachers by stating, that it was owing to the sloth or the pride of the latter, that the former were discontinued; for the teachers wished to have the whole government to themselves.

The only other christian father, from whose writings I shall quote, is Jerome, who lived in the fourth century. In the passage which I am about to quote, he states the scriptural arguments in favour of the office of the elder, and refers to the authority which the bishops had begun to usurp over the elders. The passage is extracted from his commentary on the epistle to Titus:—“Let us (says he) carefully heed the words of the apostle, saying, ‘That thou mayest ordain elders in every city as I have appointed thee.’ Who, discoursing in what follows what sort of presbyter ought to be ordained, says this, ‘If any one be blameless, the husband of one wife,’ &c., afterwards adds, ‘For a bishop must be blameless as the steward of God.’ A presbyter is

<sup>1</sup> Commentary on 1 Tim. v. 17, as quoted by the authors of Jus Divinum Reg. Eccl., p. 172.

therefore the same with a bishop. And before that, by the devil's instinct, there were parties in religion : and it was said among the people, ' I am of Paul, I of Apollos, and I of Cephas,' the churches were governed by the common council of presbyters. But after that every one began to think that those whom he had baptized were his own, not Christ's ; it was decreed in the whole world that one chosen from among the presbyters should be set above the rest, to whom all care of the church should belong, and that the seeds of schisms might be taken away. If any one think that this is our judgment, and not the judgment of the Scriptures, that a bishop and presbyter are one ; and that the one is a name of age, the other of office ;—let him read again the words of the apostle to the Philippians, saying, ' Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus, that are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons, grace to you and peace,' and so on. Philippi is one city of Macedonia, and surely in one city there could not be a plurality of such as are called bishops. But because at that time they called the same persons bishops and presbyters, therefore he spake indifferently of bishops as of presbyters. This may yet seem doubtful to some, unless it be proven by another testimony. In the



Acts of the Apostles it is written, that when the apostle had come to Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called the presbyters of that same church, to whom afterward, among other things, he said : ‘ Take heed to yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord, which he hath purchased with his own blood.’ And here observe carefully, how calling the presbyters of the one city of Ephesus, he afterwards calls the same persons bishops. If any will receive that epistle, which is written to the Hebrews under the name of Paul ; there also the care of the church is divided among many : for he writes to the people, ‘ Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls, as those that must give an account, that they may not do it with grief, for this is unprofitable for you.’ And Peter, who received his name from the strength of his faith, speaketh in his epistle, saying, ‘ The presbyters who are among you I exhort, who am also a presbyter, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed, feed the flock of the Lord which is among you, not as of necessity, but willingly.’ We have alleged these things, that we might show that among the ancients the presbyters were the

same with the bishops : But that by little and little the roots of dissension might be plucked up, the whole care was devolved upon one. As therefore the presbyters know that by the custom of the church they are subject to him who is set over them ; so let the bishops know that they are greater than the presbyters rather by custom, than the truth of the Lord's disposition or ordering, and that they ought to govern the church in common, imitating Moses, who, when he had it in his power alone to govern the people of Israel, chose seventy with whom he might judge the people." <sup>1</sup>

This testimony of Jerome is very explicit, both as to what was the practice of the primitive church, and also as to the change that had begun to take place in his time. Though at first there was a complete equality between the teaching and the ruling elders, yet this equality gradually disappeared ; and the way in which it did so, was by the teaching elder habitually presiding in the meetings of the elders. The consequence of this was, that instead of being designated by the common title of *a* bishop or overseer, he came to be called *the* bishop or overseer : and in process of time, he claimed and exercised a

<sup>1</sup> Commentary on Titus, as quoted by Anderson in his reply to Rhind, pp. 170, 171.

power over the rest of the elders which, as Jerome states, was sanctioned by *custom*—and not by Scripture.

The following passage, from King's Inquiry into the Constitution of the Primitive Church, throws considerable light on the process, by which the change now referred to, was gradually accomplished. After making a variety of quotations from the writings of the fathers, to prove that bishops and elders were originally the same, he says,—“ So that there were only the two orders of the deacons and presbyters, the former whereof being the inferior order, never sat at their ecclesiastical conventions, but like servants stood and waited on the latter, who sat down on *θρονoi*, or seats in the form of a semicircle, whence they are frequently called *Consessus Presbyterii*, or the *Session of the Presbytery*, in which session he that was more peculiarly the bishop or minister of the parish sat at the head of the semicircle, on a seat somewhat elevated above those of his colleagues, as Cyprian calls them, and so was distinguished from them by his priority in the same order, but not by his being of another order. Thus the foresaid Clemens Alexandrinus distinguishes the bishop from the presbyters, by his being advanced to the *πρωτοκαθεδρία*, or the first seat in the presbytery (eldership)

not by his sitting in a different seat from them : For thus he writes, ‘ He is in truth a presbyter of the church, and a minister of the will of God, who does and teaches the things of the Lord, not ordained by men, or esteemed just, because a presbyter, but because just, therefore received into the presbytery (eldership) ; who although he be not honoured with the first seat on earth, yet shall hereafter sit down on the twenty and four thrones, mentioned in the Revelations, judging the people.’ So that both bishops and presbyters were members of the same presbytery, only the bishop was advanced to the first and chiefest seat therein, which is the very same with what I come now from proving, namely, that bishops and presbyters were equal in order, but different in degree.”—Pp. 74, 75.

Mosheim mentions that the form of government in the church underwent a gradual change to the worse, during the third century ; and he attributes this change to the pride and ambition of those ministers who, in consequence of presiding in the meetings of the eldership, were now exclusively honoured with the title *bishop*,—“The face of things” he says, “began now to change in the christian church. The ancient method of ecclesiastical government seemed, in general, still to subsist, while, at the same time, by imper-

ceptible steps, it varied from the primitive rule, and degenerated towards the form of a religious monarchy. For the bishops aspired to higher degrees of power and authority than they had formerly possessed; and not only violated the rights of the people, but also made gradual encroachments upon the privileges of the presbyters. And that they might cover their usurpations with an air of justice, and an appearance of reason, they published new doctrines concerning the nature of the church, and of the episcopal dignity, which, however, were in general so obscure that they themselves seem to have understood them as little as those to whom they were delivered. One of the principal authors of this change, in the government of the church, was Cyprian, who pleaded for the power of the bishops with more zeal and vehemence than had ever been hitherto employed in their cause, though not with an unshaken constancy and perseverance; for, in difficult and perilous times, necessity sometimes obliged him to yield, and submit several things to the judgment and authority of the church.”<sup>1</sup>

The extracts which I have given from the writings of the Fathers, will show that in the period which

<sup>1</sup> Eccles. Hist. Cent. 3. Chap. ii. § 3.

immediately succeeded that of the apostles, the government of the church was administered by elders—including those that taught and those that merely ruled. In the meetings of these elders one was accustomed to preside, who afterwards had the title of *bishop* applied to him by way of distinction. During the long and dark night of popery, the primitive and scriptural form of government, which has been delineated in the preceding pages, was entirely subverted; and there was erected in the bosom of the christian church, a lordly and tyrannical system of priestly dominion, beneath which freedom—both civil and religious—was for a course of ages trampled in the dust.

It will add to the mass of evidence, that has already been adduced in favour of the office of the ruling elder, if I shall show that this scriptural mode of government obtained among the Waldenses and other churches, that maintained a sound creed and a comparatively pure discipline, during the darkest period of the reign of antichrist—and if I shall further show that, no sooner did the light of the reformation, dawn upon the world, than this form of government was adopted in almost all the reformed churches, as being the one which, in the opinion of those eminent men, the reformers, was sanctioned both by aposto-

lical precept and apostolical example. Blair, in his history of the Waldenses, says, "They did not distinguish the teaching presbyter from the bishop. They had indeed three orders of men above their ordinary members—the bishop or teaching elder—the lay elder, and the deacon. The existence of the second class is clearly expressed in Article IV. of the foregoing discipline, for they are called 'rulers and elders chosen out of the people.' The deacons are always mentioned as taking charge of the funds of the churches, but never as preaching. Though the public money is mentioned in the above article, yet the existence of deacons is not stated. Probably at that time the ministers and lay elders were to take charge of the contributions. After all, these three orders are probably just what Dr Allix means by bishops, priests, and deacons."<sup>1</sup> The article referred to by Blair, in the extract now given, is the 4th article of "The ancient discipline of the evangelical churches of the Valleys of Piedmont," which is expressed in the following terms—"Rulers and elders are chosen out of the people, according to the diversity of the work, in the unity of Christ. And the apostle proveth it to Titus, chap. i. 'For this cause left I

<sup>1</sup> History of the Waldenses. Appendix to vol. i. p. 540.



thee in Crete, that thou shouldst set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.' The money which is given us by the people is by us carried to the foresaid general council, and there delivered publicly in the presence of all; and afterwards the same is taken and distributed by our stewards, part of the money being given to such as are sent upon journeys for occasion, and part of it given to the poor."<sup>1</sup>

The brethren in Bohemia, whose views of divine truth were similar to those held by the Waldenses, withdrew from the Greek church, and formed themselves into a separate communion, in the year 1467. Blair, giving an account of their government and discipline, says—"Each congregation consisted of beginners, who were children, or ignorant persons requiring to be catechised; of those growing in grace; and of the perfect, who had made considerable progress, though not completely perfect. In each congregation, from two to eight elders chosen from among the perfect, had, in concert with the minister, the oversight of the morals of the people. This court was called the *Presbytery*, and its duties

<sup>1</sup> History of the Waldenses. Appendix to vol. i. p. 535.



seem to have been similar to those of a kirk-session in Scotland. The members exhorting such brothers or sisters as were turning to the broad way; if the persons persevered they were rebuked; and if obstinate, the matter was referred to the minister. Each family was visited once a quarter and inquiry made regarding family devotion, morning and evening, respecting the reading of the Scriptures, and the conduct of every individual. They tried to procure work for their artizans, urged them to avoid extortion, and cautioned them against contracting debts. Widows, orphans, and all their poor were supported by collections made on purpose, and the almoners from time to time laid the state of accounts before the elders. Four times a year voluntary donations were collected to defray expenses at the Lord's Supper, to purchase candles, to repair the minister's house, to support poor ministers, and to aid weak congregations. The congregations audited their accounts once a year. The elders visited the sick, and urged them to settle their worldly affairs for the benefit of widow and children. The elders also tried to reconcile discordant brethren, and in law-processes directed them how to act before the magistrates. The congregation, by a majority of votes, chose the elders, whose duties being explained, they, in presence

of the bishop, minister, and congregation, promised solemnly to fulfill them.”<sup>1</sup>

In the year 1540, Calvin entered into a correspondence with the Bohemian brethren, to obtain correct information concerning their church polity, with which he was highly delighted. “I heartily congratulate (he writes) your churches upon which, besides sound doctrine, God hath bestowed so many excellent gifts. Of these gifts, it is none of the least to have such pastors to govern and to order them ; to have a people themselves so well affected and disposed ; to be constituted under so noble a form of government ; to be adorned with the most excellent discipline—which we justly call most excellent ;—and indeed the only bond by which obedience can be preserved. I am sure, I find with us by woeful experience, what the worth of it is, by the want of it ; nor yet can we by any means attain to it.” On his return, in 1541, from Strasburg—where he was for a few years in a state of exile—he introduced into Geneva the form of ecclesiastical government, which he had so much admired in the churches of Bohemia.

A similar form of ecclesiastical polity was introduced into almost all the reformed churches, on the

<sup>1</sup> History of Waldenses, vol. ii. pp. 97, 98.

continent of Europe; also into the church of Scotland. Similar views were held, and acted upon, by the English puritans. Neale, in his History,<sup>1</sup> informs us that in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, there was a book entitled, *The Holy Discipline of the Church described in the word of God*, which was held in high esteem among them. It was drawn up in Latin, by Mr Travers, and printed at Geneva about the year 1574; and was afterwards “diligently reviewed, corrected, and perfected by Mr Cartwright, and other learned ministers at their Synods.” “It contains,” says Neale, “the substance of those alterations in discipline, that the puritans of these times contended for, and was subscribed by the brethren hereafter named, as agreeable to the word of God, and to be promoted by all lawful means, that it may be established by the authority of the magistrate and of the church; and in the meantime to be observed, as far as they lawfully may, consistently with the laws of the land, and peace of the church.” The brethren to whom he refers as having subscribed this book, were between five and six hundred beneficed ministers of the Church of England: “All of them,” says the historian, “useful preachers; of unspotted lives and

<sup>1</sup> History of Puritans. Appendix to vol. i. p. 449.

characters ; and many of them of the University of Cambridge, where they had a strong and powerful interest.”<sup>1</sup> In this directory of church government, which was subscribed by so many of the puritans, and also acted upon, in many parts of the country, so far as the state of the times would permit, the following passages occur:—“ The ministers of the church are, first, they that are ministers of the word. In their examinations, it is specially to be taken heed unto, that they be apt to teach, and tried men, not utterly unlearned, nor newly planted and converted to the faith.

“ Now these ministers of the word are, first, pastors which do administer the word and sacraments, then teachers which are occupied in wholesome doctrine. Besides, there are also elders, which watch over the life and behaviour of every man, and deacons which have care over the poor.

“ Further, in every particular church there ought to be a presbytery, which is a consistory, and, as it were, a senate of elders. Under the name of elders here, are contained they who in the church minister doctrine, and they who are properly called elders.

“ By the common counsel of the eldership, all

<sup>1</sup> Vol. i. p. 484.

things are directed that belong to the common state of their church. First, such as belong to the guidance of the whole body of it in the holy and common assembly, gathered together in the name of the Lord, that all things may be done in them duly, orderly, and to edification. 2. Then also such as pertain to particular persons. First, to all the members of that church, that the good may enjoy all the privileges that belong unto them, that the wicked may be corrected with ecclesiastical censures, according to the quality of the fault, private and public, by admonishing and by removing either from the Lord's Supper by suspension (as is commonly called), or out of the church by excommunication."<sup>1</sup>

In another document, entitled *English Puritanism*, which contains a summary of the faith and order of the puritan congregationalists of England, and which was drawn up by Mr Bradshaw about the year 1605, we find the following distinct recognition of the divine authority of the office of the ruling elder :—

“ Since even in the best constituted churches, they know that not a few enormous offences will arise, which, if not timely met, will do injury both to those who believe, and those who are inquiring : while,

<sup>1</sup> Neale's Hist. of the Puritans. Appendix to vol. i. p. 608.

at the same time, they see that the authority of a single person in a parish, resembling the papal, is contrary to the will of Christ: they think, as the case itself requires, and as appointed of God, that others also should be selected from the church, as officers, who may be associated with the ministers in the spiritual government.

“ These are inspectors, *επιτιμηται*, a kind of censors, whose duty it is, together with the ministers of the word, as well to watch over the conduct of all the brethren, as to judge between them. And they think that this office is instituted that each may take the more heed to himself and his ways, while the ministers enjoy more leisure for study and devotion, and obtain, through the assistance of their coadjutors, a more accurate view of the state of the flock; since it is the peculiar duty of the inspectors to be always watchful over the manners and conduct of all the members of the church. To this office they think that none should be preferred but men very eminent for gravity and prudence; established in the faith; of tried integrity; whose sanction of life and upright example are well known to the whole society.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Neale's History as quoted by Miller, p. 120.

In the year 1645, the English parliament appointed a committee to take into consideration the differences of opinion among the members of the Westminster Assembly respecting church government, and to endeavour, if possible, to unite them. In a paper which the independent brethren gave in to this committee, stating how far their views on this subject coincided with those of the presbyterians, the following proposition found a place :—" That our congregations may have liberty to constitute their own elderships, having a competent number of persons fitly qualified for elders ; and that all who communicate in the Lord's Supper may have liberty to choose their own officers." <sup>1</sup> From this proposition, it appears that the independent party did not object to having ruling elders in their congregations. The main point of difference between them and the presbyterians (in so far as church government was concerned) was the subordination of one ecclesiastical judicatory to another—such as of sessions to presbyteries, and of presbyteries to synods.

The testimony of the learned Dr Owen, on the subject of the ruling elder, has already been quoted.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Papers and Answers of the Dissenting Brethren, and the Committee of Assembly of Divines, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> See page 106.



Dr Timothy Dwight, late President of Yale College in America—though a decided congregationalist—admits, in the following terms, the divine authority of this office :—“ Ruling elders are, in my apprehension, scriptural officers of the christian church ; and I cannot but think our defection, with respect to these officers, from the practice of the first settlers of New England, an error in ecclesiastical government.”<sup>1</sup>

The Rev. Thomas Hooker, who was settled at Hartford in New England, and who wrote, during the seventeenth century, in favour of the congregational mode of church government, makes the following remarks in a treatise, entitled *A Survey of Church Discipline* :—“ We begin with the ruling elder’s place, for that carries a kind of simplicity with it. There be more ingredients required to make up the office of pastor and doctor ; and therefore we shall take leave to trade in the first, *quo simplicius ac prius*. That there is such an office and officer appointed by Christ, as the Scriptures are plain to him whose spirit and apprehension is not possessed and forestalled with prejudice, the first argument we have from Romans xii. 7, which gives in witness

<sup>1</sup> System of Theology, vol. ii. p. 575.



to this truth, where all these officers are numbered and named expressly. The second argument is taken from 1 Cor. xii. 28. The scope of the place, and the apostle's intendment is, to lay open the several offices and officers that the Lord hath set in his church, and so many chief members out of which the church is constituted as an entire body.”<sup>1</sup>

The Rev. Cotton Mather, another American congregationalist, in a work entitled *Magnalia Christi Americana*, states his views in the following terms: —“ There are some who cannot see any such officer as what we call a ruling elder, directed and appointed in the word of God; and partly through a prejudice against the office; and partly, indeed chiefly, through a penury of men well qualified for the discharge of it; as it has been heretofore understood and applied, our churches are now generally destitute of such helps in government. But unless a church have divers elders, the church government must needs become either prelatie or popular. And that a church's needing but one elder, is an opinion, contrary not only to the sense of the faithful in all ages, but also to the law of the Scriptures, where there can be nothing plainer than elders who rule well,

<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Miller in his Essay on the Eldership, p. 123.

and are worthy of double honour, though they do not labour in the word and doctrine : whereas, if there were any teaching elders, who do not labour in the word and doctrine, they would be so far from worthy of double honour, that they would not be worthy of any honour at all. Towards the adjusting of the difference which has thus been in the judgments of judicious men, some essays have been made, and one particularly in such terms as these. Let it be first recognised, that all the other church officers are the assistants of the pastor, who was himself entrusted with the whole care of all, until the further pity and kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ joined other officers unto him for his assistance in it. I suppose none will be so absurd as to deny this at least ; that all the church officers are to take the advice of the pastor with them. Upon which I subjoin, that a man may be a distinct officer from his pastor, and yet not have a distinct office from him. The pastor may be the ruling elder, and yet he may have elders to assist him in ruling, and in the actual discharge of some things which they are able and proper to be serviceable to him in. This consideration being laid, I will persuade myself every pastor among us will allow me, that there is much work to be done for God in preparing of what

belongs to the admission and exclusion of church members ; in carefully inspecting the way and walk of them all, and the first appearance of evil with them ; in preventing the very beginnings of ill blood among them, and instructing of all from house to house, more privately, and warning of all persons unto the things more peculiarly incumbent on them ; in visiting all the afflicted, and informing of, and consulting with the ministers, for the welfare of the whole flock. And they must allow me, that this work is too heavy for any one man ; and that more than one man, yea, all our churches, do suffer beyond measure, because no more of this work is thoroughly performed.”<sup>1</sup>

Learned authors, connected with the Church of England, have borne testimony to the fact of there being ruling elders in the primitive church. Archbishop Whitgift, the learned opponent of Cartwright and of the puritans during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, says, in one of his controversial publications—“ I know that, in the primitive church, they had in every church certain seniors, to whom the government of the congregation was committed ; but that was before there was any christian prince

<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Miller in his *Essay on the Eldership*, p. 129.

or magistrate that openly professed the gospel ; and before there was any church by public authority established.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr Whitby, in his commentary on 1 Tim. v. 17, has the following remarks :—“ The elders among the Jews were of two sorts ; 1st, such as governed in the synagogue ; and, 2dly, such as ministered in reading and expounding their scriptures and traditions, and from them pronouncing what did bind or loose, or what was forbidden, and what was lawful to be done. For when, partly by their captivity, and partly through increase of traffic, they were dispersed in considerable bodies through divers regions of the world, it was necessary that they should have governors or magistrates to keep them in their duty, and judge of criminal causes ; and also rabbins to teach them the law, and the tradition of their fathers. The first were ordained *ad judicandum, sed non ad docendum de licitis et vetitis, i. e.* to judge and govern, but not to teach. The second, *ad docendum, sed non ad judicandum, i. e.* to teach, but not to judge or govern.”—“ And these the apostle here declares to be the most honourable, and worthy of the chiefest reward. Accordingly, the

<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Miller in his Essay on the Eldership, p. 105.

apostle, reckoning up the officers God had appointed in the church, places teachers before governments ; 1 Cor. xii. 28."

Dr Whitaker, who was Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, writing against Dury, a Scotch Jesuit, says, " Art thou so ignorant, that thou knowest not that there are elders in the church of Christ whose work it is to govern only, not to preach the word or dispense the sacraments." <sup>1</sup>

The evidence in behalf of the office of the ruling elder, I consider as in every respect complete. I have adduced a variety of passages from the New Testament, in which the office is distinctly recognised as one that is of divine appointment. I have shown, from the writings of the Fathers, that during the early ages of the christian era, there was a council of elders that bore rule in every church. I have further shown, that after the practice of having ruling elders in the churches had grown into dissuetude, through the corruptions of the church of Rome—the Waldenses and other religious bodies, among whom the light of gospel truth was to a considerable extent preserved even during the darkest ages, had

<sup>1</sup> Anderson in Reply to Rhind, p. 178.

ruling elders ordained amongst them—as being the form of church government which they considered to be sanctioned by Christ and his apostles. This form, I have also shown, was generally adopted by the churches of the Reformation; and, in adopting it, those distinguished men, who led the way in the work of reformation, maintained that it was clearly sanctioned by the word of God. In fine, I have adduced the testimony of learned men connected with congregational churches, and also of some connected with the Church of England, declaring, in decided terms, their conviction that the office of the ruling elder is in accordance with Scripture. The evidence, which I have brought forward from these various sources, will, I trust, be sufficient to convince every unprejudiced person, that there ought to be ruling elders associated with the teaching elder in all the churches; and that those churches, where such office-bearers find no place, are so far defective in their organisation. Their situation bears a resemblance to that of the churches in Crete, where Titus was left *to ordain elders*—and “to set in order the things that were wanting.”

## CHAPTER VI.

Qualifications necessary in ruling elders—Piety—Knowledge—Practical wisdom—Experience in the christian life—A blameless conduct—Duties of the eldership—Ruling—Overseeing—Watching for souls—Visitation of the sick—Family visitation—Instructing the young—Setting an example to the flock—The manner in which the duties of the eldership are to be performed—Faithfully—Diligently—Impartially—Affectionately—In humble dependance upon divine grace—Encouragements to ruling elders—Christ's promise to be with them in their meetings—His promise to ratify their decisions.

THERE is no class of men on whom, under God, the prosperity of religion in our churches is more dependent, than those who are invested with the office of the eldership. Viewed as a divinely instituted mean of accomplishing good, it is scarcely possible to overrate the importance of this office. Paul shows us in what light he regarded it when he declared it to be “a true saying,” that “If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.” The person who is called to labour as an overseer, in the house of God, is placed in a situation where he has it in his power to be extensively useful. It is with the view of promoting the efficiency,

and extending the usefulness of this class of office-bearers that I shall now state the qualifications which they ought to possess—describe the nature of the duties which they are required to perform—point out the manner in which these duties ought to be discharged—and show what encouragements they have to be faithful and conscientious in the honourable work in which they are engaged.

1. Of the qualifications necessary in a ruling elder. The highest and most essential of these qualifications is *piety*. He who is appointed to bear rule in the church ought certainly to be a person who is imbued with the fear of God. He who is destitute of this principle cannot be supposed to take a very deep interest in the advancement of religion. If he labour at all in the service of God, his labours will neither be very cordial nor very abundant. Where the only motives that influence the conduct of an office-bearer in the church are of a worldly kind, he will rest satisfied with as scanty an amount of labour as will barely suffice for the ordinary routine duties of his office ; and even this amount will be given more in the way of constrained effort than of cheerful co-operation. There is no efficient working principle in matters of religion, except love to God, which is the basis (or rather, I should say, the essence) of all



true piety. This qualification, then, ought to be regarded as essential. If it be wanting, no other qualification will make up for the deficiency. He who is called upon to rule in the house of God, while he is without piety, is destitute of the main spring of christian activity.

Another necessary qualification in a ruling elder is *knowledge*. Along with piety there ought to be combined intelligence. I here chiefly refer to a knowledge of the Scriptures. It is only by having his mind well stored with those diversified topics, which the sacred volume furnishes, that the ruling elder can become an efficient labourer in his Master's work. As it comes within the sphere of his calling to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort," how can he be furnished with suitable materials for such exercises, unless by a familiar acquaintance with Scripture. Paul, writing to Titus, says, that an elder ought to "be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayers;"<sup>1</sup> and that he may be properly qualified for the successful discharge of this important duty, the apostle represents it as necessary that he hold fast "the faithful word as he hath been taught."

Another qualification, necessary to be possessed

<sup>1</sup> Titus i. 9.

by a ruling elder, is *practical wisdom*. This consists in a person's being able to conduct himself with prudence in any particular situation in which he is placed. It implies the possession of a certain degree of shrewdness or sagacity, which enables its possessor to discern the ground that he ought to occupy, in any transaction in which he may be engaged; and it implies also the possession of a certain amount of firmness, which enables the individual to act with promptitude and decision when any particular emergency arises. To this quality the Saviour pointedly refers, in the first commission which he gave to his apostles, when he said to them, "Be ye wise as serpents." There are many persons, possessed of genuine piety and of a considerable amount of scriptural knowledge, who, on account of a natural softness or simplicity, are totally unfit for exercising rule over others. So far from being able to act as guides to their fellow Christians—or to undertake the management of the affairs of the house of God—they are scarcely competent for the management of their own concerns. There are others, who, though they may be both well-intentioned and well-informed, yet have a certain recklessness of disposition and an impetuosity of temper which render them totally unfit either for calm deliberation or

prudent acting. They can scarcely intermeddle in any transaction without embroiling themselves with one party or another. Those who are called upon to officiate as elders in the church, and who, in the discharge of the duties of their office, have so many different characters to deal with, and so many important measures passing under their review, ought to be possessed of that practical wisdom which discerns what is right and fitting to be done—which points out the most prudent measures to be adopted, with a view to the attainment of any particular object—and which enables the individual patiently and steadily to pursue his course in the midst of difficulties, until the end in view be successfully accomplished.

Further, it is desirable that those who are required to officiate, as ruling elders, should be persons who possess *experience in the christian life*. To this qualification the apostle Paul refers, when writing to Timothy, and describing what kind of person an overseer in the church ought to be, he says—"Not a novice;" as if he should say, "he ought not to be one who is inexperienced." That individual, who has no experimental acquaintance with the trials and difficulties and temptations that beset the path of the Christian, must be but ill fitted for giving counsel to

the perplexed, consolation to the afflicted, and warning to the thoughtless. The title *elder* sufficiently shows us, that those who were originally elected to fill this office were persons who, in addition to their other qualifications, possessed that experience which age is supposed to impart. It is not, indeed, necessary that those who are chosen to be elders should be persons of advanced life. Such persons are often disqualified by bodily infirmity, and by a decay of their mental powers, for efficiently discharging the duties of such an office. Gravity and experience are not necessarily associated with age. Many are the instances of persons, who are comparatively young, giving proof, by their conduct, of decided piety, and of a maturity in the christian life far beyond what their years would indicate. Though they may not have proceeded so far, as others, in the christian journey—yet, by prayer and meditation and habitual fellowship with God, they may have attained to a high degree of experience in the divine life. Such persons are a valuable acquisition to any eldership. Those who are elected to this office ought certainly to be in the full vigour of their bodily and mental powers; but they ought also to have reached that period when, as Christians, they have acquired experience of the workings of religion in the soul.

When the dignity of office is combined with the inexperience of youth—when persons are appointed to rule in the house of God, to whom religion is either altogether new, or known (it may be) but as a matter of speculation—there is danger of their being lifted up with pride, and falling “into the condemnation of the devil.” At all events, there is little probability of their proving efficient labourers in the work to which they have been set apart.

The only other qualification, which I shall mention as necessary to the individual who is appointed to the office of ruling elder, is *having a walk and a conversation that are blameless*. Paul mentions this as an indispensable requisite in an overseer: “He *must* (he says) have a good report of them which are without.”<sup>1</sup> A person whose character is bad, or even doubtful, wants one of the scriptural qualifications for this office. He must have a good report, not only of the brethren with whom he is associated, but “of them that are without”—that is, of those who are not connected with the church. For as these persons naturally judge of religion by looking at the effects which it produces on the conduct of those who profess it—so it must tend much to pre-

<sup>1</sup> 1 Tim. iii. 7.

judice their minds against it, should they find office-bearers in the church pursuing a course of conduct at variance with the religion which they profess. Even though there may be nothing that is grossly immoral or profane in their conduct, yet, should there be frequent acts of indiscretion, an unfavourable impression will be produced upon the minds of those who observe these instances of unguarded behaviour. The usefulness of an office-bearer depends as much—nay probably it depends more—upon the character which he maintains, than it does upon his natural talents or his acquired attainments. He may have excellent natural endowments, and may possess extensive information ; yet, if he be not “ of good report,” this circumstance will materially abridge, if it do not altogether destroy his usefulness. On the other hand, if his character be without reproach—if he be known as a person whose conduct is uniformly consistent with the profession which he makes—he will not merely secure the approbation of those who belong to the same religious community with himself—but he will command the respect even of those “ that are without.” The influence that arises from excellence of character operates most beneficially. There are few who are capable of resisting it. Even worldly men, in spite of the prejudices which they

entertain against religion, are obliged to do homage to its power. Where this influence is wanting, one beneficial effect, intended to be accomplished by the christian eldership, will be defeated. They will fail in proving ensamples to the flock. For it is impossible, that those persons can prove ensamples to others, whose characters are such as either to excite secret contempt, or call forth open reproach. It ought, then, to be regarded as an indispensable qualification in an elder, that his walk and conversation be blameless, so that he may have a good report of them that are without.

2. Of the *duties* of the ruling elder. The primary and most essential duty connected with his office is that of *ruling*. To him it belongs to administer those laws, which Christ has laid down for the government of his church. As a ruler, he acts not by himself, but in conjunction with others, who have been set apart to the same office, and invested with the same authority as himself. When associated together, for the purpose of administering the laws of Christ's house, they constitute a judicatory assembled in the name of Christ—who promises that he will be graciously present with them, and that he will ratify the sentences which they may pronounce, in so far as these are in accordance with his word. In the



exercise of that authority, with which they have been entrusted by the King of Zion, they are to judge of the claims of those, who make application to be received into the communion of the church. They are to suspend from church fellowship those who, by their conduct, prove themselves unworthy of the privileges which they enjoy ; and they are to readmit to communion those who may have been suspended for a season—after they have given satisfactory evidence of their penitence. There is no part of the duty of an elder which requires the exercise of greater caution and firmness and fidelity than that to which I am now adverting. He is, by the faithful administration of the laws of discipline, to maintain purity and order in the house of God. He is to take care, on the one hand, lest, by opening too wide a door of admission, he may break down the distinction that ought to exist between the church and the world ; and he is to guard, on the other, against acting under the influence of a spirit of jealousy,—viewing every character with a jealous eye—and thereby rendering the door of admission so strait, that persons whom Christ has received may be excluded. As none ought to be rashly received into the communion of the church, so none ought to be inconsiderately cast out. In suspending any member



from the enjoyment of his privileges, or in cutting off from the communion of the church altogether, such a sentence ought not to proceed on mere surmise, or suspicion, or vague report. But there ought to be at least probable evidence of the guilt of the person against whom such a measure is adopted.

In connexion with ruling, elders are to exercise a general superintendence over the affairs of the congregation in which they are office-bearers. "Feed the flock of God that is among you (says Peter, addressing himself to elders), *overseeing* them, not by constraint, but willingly."<sup>1</sup> The word in the original, which is rendered "feed," is *ποιμανατε*, which denotes the care that a shepherd exercises over his flock, and implies in it *governing* as well as *feeding*. I have quoted, in a preceding part of this work, an instance in which the same term is employed to denote the rule which Christ exercises over his church.<sup>2</sup> The passage which I have quoted from the first epistle of Peter, shows that, in connexion with ruling, there is to be a willing superintendence exercised by the elders. This superintendence is to be of the same kind with that which a watchful shepherd exercises over his flock. The Spirit of God shows the import-

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet. v. 2.

<sup>2</sup> See page 63.

ance which he attaches to this part of an elder's duty, by so frequently employing in Scripture the term *overseer*, to describe the nature of his office. Whatever relates either to the temporal or the spiritual prosperity of the congregation ought to be an object of his care ; and all scriptural means ought to be employed by him with a view to its advancement. It is a sacred charge which is committed to him ; when he is entrusted with the oversight of that church, " which God hath purchased with his own blood." He is to consider in what way its spiritual interests may be best promoted. He is to look around him with a watchful eye ; and to guard against the introduction of every thing that may have a tendency to mar its harmony, or injure its spirituality ; and he is to let slip no opportunity that may present itself, of promoting its increase, its purity, and its general respectability. This oversight, which he is required to exercise, is to extend not only to the general interests of the society, but to the welfare of all the families and individuals connected with the community of which he is an overseer. In a word, a portion of the flock of Christ has been committed to his charge—and he is so to superintend its concerns, that the cause of religion may be effectually promoted among all the members.

This leads me to notice further, that Scripture speaks in very solemn terms of the great end, which elders ought to keep in view, in their superintendence of the flock ; and that is the salvation of the souls of their fellow-men. They are described, in emphatic language, as *watching for souls*. This is stated, by an apostle, as a reason why the members of the church ought to obey their spiritual rulers. It is because the object, for which they have been appointed to bear rule in the church, is the everlasting well-being of the souls of those who are under their charge : “ Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves ; for *they watch for your souls*, as they that must give account.”<sup>1</sup> The benevolent design of Christ, in instituting an eldership in the christian church, is indicated in these words—*they watch for your souls*. The design of this institution (in subordination to the glory of God) is the spiritual benefit of the souls of men. Elders have further pointed out to them, in these words, what the great Head of the church requires of them, with a view to the accomplishing of this benevolent design. They are not to consider it a matter of indifference, whether the persons who are placed under their

<sup>1</sup> Heb. xiii. 17.

superintendence be saved or not. But they are to *watch* for their souls. They are to watch with a view to win them to Christ. In ruling and superintending the flock, this is the object they are to aim at accomplishing : the salvation of the souls of their fellow-men. They are to keep this object constantly and steadily in view. This watching implies, that they are to be always at their post—always on the alert—eagerly looking out for opportunities of promoting the spiritual benefit of those who are entrusted to their charge ; and when these opportunities are presented, they are to improve them to the best advantage. They are to regard themselves as humble instruments appointed for the purpose of winning souls to Christ. Whatever talents and influence they possess are to be devoted by them to this sacred object ; and to be successful in accomplishing it, they are to esteem their highest reward. Those persons overlook the main design of the office of the eldership, who think that they do all that is incumbent on them, as elders, when they attend to mere external arrangements, and when they do little or nothing to promote the spiritual interests of the people. While they do what is necessary for the maintenance of external order—they are to be chiefly concerned about the salvation of the souls of their fellow-men.

They are to be instant in season and out of season in promoting this object : *they are to watch for souls.*

*The visitation of the sick* is mentioned in Scripture, as another duty to which elders are specially called upon to attend. “Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him.”<sup>1</sup> There is no way by which a pious, prudent, and faithful elder may be more useful, than by being regular in his visits at the bed-sides of the afflicted and the dying. Affliction has, for the most part, a softening influence upon the hearts of those who are visited with it. The mind is then peculiarly apt to receive the lessons of religion. If there be any period when the thoughtless are more apt to be impressed with divine things than another, it is when the rod of God is laid upon them, and when they have—it may be—the near prospect of entering the eternal world. On such occasions, the language of affectionate remonstrance, of faithful warning, or of mild reproof, will be listened to with attention, when in other circumstances it would be despised. Such language, addressed to a careless individual, who has been brought low by the afflicting hand of God, is calculated to produce the happiest results.

<sup>1</sup> James v. 14.

Or, if the person who is afflicted be a child of God, how soothing and consolatory to him will be the pious conversation and the prayers of an elder whom he has been accustomed to revere. Whether those who are stretched on the bed of affliction be converted or unconverted, there is, amid such scenes, a wide field of usefulness which it becomes conscientious elders carefully to cultivate. Who can tell what an amount of spiritual benefit they may be instrumental in producing, by their oft repeated visits to the sick-chamber and to the house of mourning. Such visits of mercy the Redeemer himself, while upon earth, delighted to pay ; and it becomes elders to imitate the divine example, which has thus been set them, by giving to the afflicted and the dying the benefit of their exhortations and their prayers. Should they be conscientious in attending to this part of their duty, they will prove themselves to be indeed blessings to the church. It is in connexion with elders visiting the sick, that we find the encouraging declaration made in Scripture, that “ the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”

I may here be permitted to observe, that ministers and elders are sometimes unjustly blamed, by members of the church, for not having visited them in their affliction,—when they have not sent any notice,

to minister or elder, of their being in distress. The scripture injunction to those who are in affliction, is express. It is, that they are *to call for the elders of the church*; and though I do not say, that elders, if they know of distress in a family, ought to wait till they are called for—yet it is decidedly wrong in any to blame them, for not having visited them, when they did not think it worth while to comply with the scripture injunction, by sending notice of their being in distress. Those who impute blame in these circumstances, act a part that is unreasonable and unjust. They ought rather to take blame to themselves, for neglecting a duty which Scripture enjoins. They ought not to take it for granted, that elders must necessarily be acquainted with their situation. When sickness has entered their dwellings—and when they desire a visit—they ought to let the elders know: and not, until they have done so, are they warranted in complaining of neglect on the part of their overseers.

Another point, in connexion with this subject, which I deem it of importance to notice, is, that the visitation of the sick is *especially* the work of elders; and that though ministers are not to overlook this work, yet there are other duties connected with their office, to which they are particularly called upon to



attend. According to the directions which Paul gives to Timothy, ministers are “to give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.”—“Meditate (he says) upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all.”<sup>1</sup> The teaching elder is to devote himself to the study of the word of God, and to the preaching of the gospel. These are the objects that ought chiefly to occupy his time and attention, and that he may have leisure to attend to them, the visitation of the sick appears to be chiefly devolved by the Spirit of God upon the elders: “Is *any* sick among you, let him call for the *elders* of the church.” Yet according to the notions, which almost universally prevail, when any are sick, it is not so much the elders as the minister that they call for; and even, in many instances, when the elders are punctual in attending upon the sick, and faithful in performing their duty to them, still these labours are not deemed sufficient, unless the minister shall super-add his visitations. The necessary consequence of this demand is, that where the flock is anyway numerous, the teaching elder must either neglect that, which is his special work, namely, his study and his preaching; or his bodily and mental powers will be

<sup>1</sup> 1 Tim. iv. 13, 15.



tasked beyond their natural endurance. In order, therefore, that the teaching elder may have it in his power, efficiently to discharge the duties of the christian ministry, by giving attendance “to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine,” while, at the same time, a proper degree of attention is paid to the sick, this latter work should be considered as devolving, if not exclusively, at least chiefly, upon the ruling elders. It is unreasonable in the people to complain of neglect, when visited regularly in affliction by their elders—merely because their minister may not be so frequently in their dwellings as they could wish, on account of important ministerial duties to which he is required to attend, and which are amply sufficient to occupy his time.

The family visitations of the elders ought not to be confined to the dwellings of the sick and the bereaved. In order to render the eldership efficient,—while all the elders ought to exercise a general superintendence over the whole congregation, each elder ought to have a particular district of the congregation assigned him, to which he is required to attend as his particular charge. Between him and the families in this district, there ought to be a frequent and friendly *official* intercourse carried on. He should visit them, from time to time, for the purpose of

doing them all the good in his power. He should inquire into their spiritual state ; and he should endeavour to suit his counsels and admonitions, as much as possible, to the circumstances of each. Such as he finds careless in attending to divine things, he should stir up. Such as he finds well-doing, he should animate to still higher exertion. Such as he finds ignorant, he should instruct. Such as he finds labouring under discouragements, he should cheer. Such as he finds pursuing a course of blacksliding, he should endeavour to reclaim ; and in all these labours of love, let him bear constantly in mind the motto inscribed upon his standard, as an office-bearer in the church, *watching for souls*.

*The young of the flock* ought particularly to be an object of solicitude on the part of elders. Though it is chiefly to parental instruction and example that we are to look for the right training of the young, yet there is a duty which the church owes to those who are its rising hopes ; and that duty is, to attend to their religious instruction. It is well known, that in every congregation, there are young persons to be found, who have none to care for them. There are others who, though they may be sufficiently provided for, as to their temporal comfort, yet are completely neglected as to their spiritual interests. If such are

permitted to grow up ignorant, careless and immoral, it is obvious that the congregation or church, where this state of things is permitted to exist, must pay the penalty, by the sad declension of religion amongst its families. To office-bearers—as invested with the spiritual superintendence of the flock—it belongs to prevent, as far as in them lies, such a deteriorating process from being carried on. The institution of Sabbath schools in congregations, I consider as useful in promoting the religious improvement of the young. Many thousands of young persons have received at these schools sound religious instruction—and have had proper principles instilled into their mind—who would otherwise have grown up ignorant and depraved: instead of which, they have, by the blessing of God upon the training which they have thus received, become ornaments in the church and blessings to society. As a mean of promoting the prosperity of religion, not only in the congregation with which they are connected, but in the church at large, elders ought to give their countenance and support to such institutions. They ought not to rest satisfied with paying them the tribute of an empty wish for their success; but they should, by their presence and personal exertion, encourage those who are engaged in carrying them on. This

is one way by which they may be instrumental in promoting, to a large extent, the benefit of the rising race, and in adding to the number of those who shall do homage to the Saviour upon earth.

Further, as elders are designated in Scripture “leaders” and “guides ;”—and as they are enjoined to be “ensamples to the flock”—so they ought to be among the foremost in originating and carrying on societies for prayer—for missions—and other religious objects. It is a reproach to office-bearers in the house of God, if they be seen lagging behind in any of these respects, while others are active in taking the lead. Instead of requiring to be stimulated by the exertion and example of others, they ought always to be seen acting a part consistent with the honourable title which they wear, as “leaders” of the flock. They occupy a prominent situation in the church. Their example is fitted to operate powerfully upon others. The eyes of the people are naturally turned toward them, in all cases where the interests of religion are concerned. It is expected of them that they be forward in every good work. In organising and conducting meetings for prayer—in giving their support to bible and missionary associations—in devising schemes for the relief of the wretched—and in all other works of

benevolence and piety—they are to be “ ensamples to the flock.” In a word, they are to tread closely in the footsteps of Him, who, while upon earth, went about constantly doing good—and who esteemed it his meat and his drink to do the will of his Father in heaven.

3. Of the manner in which the duties connected with the eldership ought to be performed. On this part of the subject I remark, that those who have such a sacred trust committed to them, as the oversight of souls, ought to discharge the trust reposed in them with *fidelity*. An apostle, speaking of office-bearers in the church as stewards, says,—“ Moreover it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful ;” 1 Cor. iv. 2. When a person occupies the office of an elder, he ought faithfully to discharge the duties of it ; and if he be placed in circumstances that he cannot faithfully discharge the duties of his office, he ought to resign it. An unfaithful steward, even in matters pertaining to men, is highly criminal. All unite in condemning such a steward. How much more criminal must that character be who is unfaithful in matters pertaining to God. He betrays the cause of his Master. He tampers with the souls of men. He brings a reproach upon his sacred profession. That the duties connected with the elder-

ship be faithfully discharged, is a matter of the highest importance. Where this is not the case, an immense injury is done to religion. Far better that the office be abrogated altogether, or kept in abeyance, than that it should be nominally occupied by men who are unfaithful to their trust.

Further, the duties of this office ought to be *diligently* performed. "He that ruleth," says Paul, "let him do it with diligence;" Rom. xii. 8. This injunction is violated by those elders who are careless or slothful. Slothful office-bearers operate as a dead weight upon any religious society with which they are connected. The work, which they ought to perform, is either totally neglected, or performed by them in such a manner as scarcely to prove a benefit. The duties connected with the eldership are of such a kind, that in order to their being efficiently performed, there ought to be regular, steady working on the part of those who occupy the office. Diligent, pains-taking elders prove a great blessing to a congregation. Even though they may not be distinguished for their ability or their gifts, yet, if they are assiduous in doing their Master's work, the probability is that it will be well done. They will have the approving testimony of their own consciences, that they have done what they could to

advance the cause of religion among those entrusted to their charge. They will acquire the esteem and respect of the good upon earth, on account of their labours of love ; and they will receive at last the approbation of their divine Master, who will welcome them into his presence with the cheering sentence —“ Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

It is further required of elders, that in discharging the duties of their office, they act *impartially*. They are to make no distinction between one class and another. So far as their official duties are concerned, they are to be equally attentive to the rich and to the poor. In all matters that come before them in their capacity as ecclesiastical rulers, and concerning which they are required to give judgment, they are to take care that they be not under the influence of any undue bias in favour of any particular party. The strictest impartiality is required of them. A solemn charge is addressed to them on this point. Paul, in his first epistle to Timothy, chap. v. 21, says—“ I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things, without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality.” Human nature is prone to err in this respect. It is difficult



to avoid having our leanings and prepossessions—by means of which our judgments are apt to be warped. Office-bearers, therefore, have need to be upon their guard. Let them not forget the apostolic caution—“doing nothing by partiality.”

Further, elders, in discharging the duties of their office, are to do so *affectionately*. They are to mingle kindness with fidelity. They are to show, both by their words and their actions, that they have at heart the best interests of those over whom the Holy Ghost hath made them overseers. The following beautiful language describes the spirit which all office-bearers ought to cherish, and the course of conduct which it becomes them to pursue, while engaged in administering the affairs of the house of God :—“ We were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children : So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us.”<sup>1</sup> Such was the spirit which the first office-bearers of the christian church manifested, while engaged in discharging the duties of their office. In cherishing such a spirit, they imitated the example which the divine Redeemer set

<sup>1</sup> 1 Thess. ii. 7, 8.



them, while he dwelt upon earth. He was meek and gentle. The bruised reed he did not break : the smoking flax he did not quench. The possession of authority is apt sometimes to excite a spirit of resistance on the part of those who are required to obey ; and there is no way by which this resistance may be more effectually overcome, and the affections of the heart won, than by exercising authority in the spirit of kindness. In order, then, that the duties of their office may be efficiently discharged, elders should show themselves “ affectionately desirous ” of those over whom they are invested with authority. They should be gentle among them, “ even as a nurse nourisheth her children.” While they manifest a proper degree of firmness—they should avoid, as much as possible, even the appearance of harshness.

Finally, I remark on this part of the subject, that elders, in attending to the duties of their office, should *cultivate habitual dependence upon divine grace*. If the apostle of the Gentiles, distinguished as he was for his attainments, exclaimed, “ Who is sufficient for these things,” well may those, who have been called upon to discharge the duties of the eldership, adopt a similar exclamation. Encompassed as they are with infirmities, and liable to be operated upon by a variety of adverse influences, they should be dis-

trustful of themselves; and in every step that they take, they should keep their eye fixed upon Christ, who has promised to make his grace sufficient for them. They should earnestly implore the Father of lights, that he would be pleased to grant them the wisdom “that is from above”—which is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and of good fruits—without partiality and without hypocrisy.”

4. Of the encouragements, which elders have to labour in their Master’s service. Their great encouragement is derived from the promises which Christ has given, and which he will assuredly fulfil. These promises are applicable to them, *as office-bearers*, and they have been given for the express purpose of encouraging them in their work. There is a general promise given, that he will be spiritually present with them at all times. It is contained in these words which he addressed to his apostles, when he gave them their last commission—“Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.” And to show that he is able to give effectual assistance to his servants, by being present with them, he prefaces this declaration by stating that all power has been given him in heaven and on earth. But to those who act the part of office-bearers in his church, he gives

a *special* promise of being present with them in their meetings, when they assemble to deliberate concerning the affairs of his house. This promise is expressed in such terms, as to be applicable to the smallest number of office-bearers, that may assemble together : It runs in the following terms—" Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them ;" Matt. xviii. 20. That this promise is designed specially to apply to office-bearers of the church, assembled together for the purpose of discipline, is obvious from the connexion in which it stands ; for it forms part of a passage where the Saviour is giving directions to his disciples, about the manner in which they are to deal with an offending brother. When they are assembled *in his name*, to deliberate concerning such a matter—even though there should be no more than two or three of them gathered together—" there" says he, " am I in the midst of them."

But this is not the whole amount of the encouragement which he gives them : for he further promises, that the sentences which they may pronounce, shall be ratified in heaven, in so far as they are agreeable to his word. In giving this promise, he does it with great solemnity : " Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven ;

and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven ;” Matt. xviii. 18. This declaration is designed to give encouragement to office-bearers in the administering of discipline : for it follows immediately after a statement of the process, which it is necessary to adopt in the case of an offending brother ; and the object for which it is introduced, is to answer an objection that may be made to the whole procedure. Suppose that all the steps of the process have been gone through—that the offending brother has been dealt with in private—that he has been admonished in the presence of two or three witnesses—that he has been brought before the ecclesiastical tribunal—and that, in consequence of his proving obstinate, a solemn sentence has been pronounced by the office-bearers, cutting him off from the communion of the church. Should he be inclined to treat all this with contempt—or should some scoffer say —“ What will your censure do ? What will follow upon it ?”—the promise now quoted enables us to say, that the sentence will not be in vain ; for Christ declares—that it shall be ratified in heaven : And, further, to show that the sentence will not be the less valid, though the office-bearers who have pronounced it may be few in number, he adds these words—“ Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree

on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven ;” Matt. xviii. 19.

The author of *Aaron's Rod Blossoming* says concerning this declaration of the Saviour, that “ It agreeth well to the power of discipline, concerning which it answereth these two objections. First, it might be said, the apostles and other church governors may fall to be very few in this or that church where the offence riseth ; shall we in that case execute any church discipline ? Yes, saith Christ, if there were but two church-officers in a church (where no more can be had) they are to exercise discipline, and it shall not be in vain. Again, it might be objected, be they two or three, or more, what if they do not agree among themselves ? To that he answereth, there must be an agreement of two church-officers at least, otherwise the sentence shall be null ; we cannot say the like of the doctrinal power of binding or loosing, that it is of no force nor validity unless two at least agree in the same doctrine, as hath been said, two must agree in that sentence or censure, which is desired to be ratified in heaven, and then they binding on earth, and unanimously calling upon God to ratify it in heaven, it shall be done.”—P. 416.

Seeing, then, that the great Head of the church has promised to be present with the office-bearers of his house, when they meet to deliberate concerning the affairs of Zion—seeing that he has promised to hear their united supplications, and to confirm the sentences which they may pronounce, in so far as they are agreeable to his word—let them not be discouraged by the difficulties they may have to contend with, in the discharge of their duty. Let them not be faint-hearted when they meet with opposition. Let them move boldly forward in the path of duty. Let them toil on, in their Master's service, encouraged by the promises which he has given them : for they may rest assured that these promises he will fulfil in their experience. Their labour shall not be in vain in the Lord. In due time they shall reap if they faint not.

## CHAPTER VII.

Office of the deacon—Opinions concerning the office—First deacons of the christian church—The office of divine appointment—Proofs in support of this—The office of the deacon distinct from that of the teaching or ruling elder—Deacons in all the primitive churches—The office designed to be permanent—Duties of the office—Preaching and ruling no part of these duties—Deacons appointed to take charge of the poor—Scriptural injunctions on this subject—Extract from the writings of Dr Dick—Testimony of Dr Dwight—Evils arising from uniting the office of the deacon and the office of the elder in the same person—Opinion of Dr Chalmers—Deacons may be usefully employed in managing the pecuniary affairs of congregations.

THE office of the deacon has been adverted to, in a preceding part of this Essay. I now propose considering the scriptural authority which we have for this office—the nature of the duties connected with it—and also whether it was designed to be of permanent continuance in the church. Some have affirmed that the statements made in the New Testament, concerning the deacon, do not warrant us in drawing the conclusion, that there was any distinct office instituted in the christian church under this designation. According to them, the term



διακονος, instead of denoting a distinct order of men whose business it was to take charge of the poor, is applied indiscriminately by the sacred writers to the Saviour, to the apostles, and to all who labour in the gospel without any regard to their peculiar work. They tell us, for instance, that Christ is styled διακονος περιτομης, a *deacon* of the circumcision, Rom. xv. 8 ; that Paul calls his apostleship “ διακονιαν ” a *deaconship*, Rom. xi. 13 ; and that, speaking of himself and his fellow labourers, he calls them “ διακονους καινης διαθηκης,” *deacons* of the New Testament, 2 Cor. iii. 6 — “ διάκονοι Θεου,” *deacons* of God, 2 Cor. vi. 4 — “ διακονοι Χριστου,” *deacons* of Christ, 2 Cor. xi. 23. They further state that the Greek term διακονος, which, with its cognates, occurs very frequently in the New Testament, is,—with five exceptions—always translated *minister* or *servant*. The exceptions occur in Phil. i. 1, and in the third chapter of the first epistle to Timothy. In these instances the word διακονος is not translated at all, but has merely an English form (*deacon*) given to it. From such premises as these the conclusion has been drawn, that this word, as it occurs in the New Testament, does not denote a distinct class of office-bearers ; but is applied indiscriminately to teaching and ruling elders, and to all who serve in the gospel in any capacity.



There are others who admit that there was such an office as that of deacon in the primitive church ; but that it was designed to be merely temporary, like that of the evangelist—and that it has ceased along with the peculiar circumstances that rendered it necessary. In opposition to the views maintained by the two classes now referred to, I shall endeavour to show, that this office is of divine institution, that it is a distinct office from that of the elder, and that it was designed to be of permanent continuance in the church.

*First,* We have an account given, of the institution of the office of the deacon, in the beginning of the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles :—“ And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole mul-

titude ; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch ; whom they set before the apostles : and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.”—Some have supposed that there were deacons before this in the church. But this supposition rests on no solid grounds. The christian church was not properly organised till after the resurrection and ascension of Christ ; and the circumstances in which the church was placed, for a short period after our Lord’s ascension, were not such as to render it necessary that there should be deacons. It was not till “ the number of the disciples was multiplied,” that the office of the deacon was found to be necessary. The simple reading of the passage, quoted above, will be sufficient to convince any unprejudiced person, that a *new* office was now instituted by the apostles—and that it was instituted by them for a specific object. It would appear, that until the disciples began to multiply, the apostles had been able to attend to the “ daily ministration”—so that no complaint was made. But *after* the disciples were multiplied, and when, of course, a much larger portion of time was required daily for distributing to the necessitous, out of the common stock, the

apostles found, that for them any longer to attend to this business was incompatible with the due discharge of other important duties. They said, "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables;" and with the view of securing a regular and equitable distribution, from the common fund, and thereby preventing any farther complaint, on the part of the Grecians against the Hebrews, they thought proper that persons should be appointed, who should have the special charge of this business. The choosing of these persons was left to the multitude of the disciples; and the setting of them apart to their office—after being chosen—was the work of the apostles.

That previous to this, there were no deacons in the church at Jerusalem, may fairly be inferred from the circumstance, that there is not the slightest allusion made to them, in the whole of this transaction; and it is natural to suppose, that if any such had existed, some reference would have been made to them. The same thing may be inferred from the language of the apostles when they said, "It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables." This obviously implies, that *as yet* there were no other persons to take the charge of serving these tables but themselves. Further, if

there had been deacons existing at this time in the church, what necessity would there have been for the apostles appointing persons “over this business.” The mentioning of the apostles *appointing* persons over this business shows that it was a *new* office they were instituting. It was an office, the sole object of which was the management of the funds collected for relieving the wants of the necessitous, and for other pious purposes ; and by the institution of it, the apostles and other office-bearers were left at liberty to devote their whole time to the preaching of the word and to the government of the church. In this passage, we have not only the institution of the office mentioned, but we have also stated the qualifications necessary in those who are required to occupy it—the manner in which these persons are to be chosen—and the formalities with which they are to be set apart to their office : all of which things indicate, that it was not a temporary expedient the apostles were adopting—but the institution of an office that was to be continued in the church.

*Secondly*, The office of the deacon finds a place in the enumeration which the apostle Paul gives, of the office-bearers whom God has appointed in the christian church. To this enumeration the attention of my readers has already been directed in a preceding

part of this work. It is necessary, for the purpose of establishing my present point, that I again advert to it. In Rom. xii. 6-8, where the apostle states, that different gifts had been conferred by the Head of the church upon the members, to fit them for discharging the duties of their respective offices—he distinctly mentions the office of the deacon as one of those for which special gifts had been conferred. This he does in these words, “ εἴτε διακονίαν, ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ,”—“ or he that hath received the office of a deacon, let him wait upon his deaconship”—let him be punctual in attending to the duties of it. In our translation the words are, “ Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering.” This rendering is too indefinite. I am aware that the term *διακονία* is employed in the New Testament to denote any kind of ministry or service done in the church—whether it be that of an apostle, or that of an evangelist, or that of a teacher, or that of a ruler, or that of a server of tables. But it is not of ministry in general, the apostle is discoursing in the passage quoted. He is speaking of *particular gifts* having been conferred with a view to *particular offices*; and he is giving an enumeration of what these offices are. *Διακονία* is one of them. This term, in the connexion in which it occurs, instead of being rendered by such a

general word as that of “*ministry*”—which applies equally to every service performed for the edification of the church—ought to be rendered by a term descriptive of some particular office ; and I know of no other meaning that it can admit of, consistently with the apostle’s object in introducing it, except that of *deaconship*, or *the office of deacon*.

Macknight admits that the term here has not a general, but a particular meaning ; and that as all the other terms employed in the passage, such as “*prophesying*”—“*teaching*”—“*exhorting*,” &c., describe stated offices in the church—so *διακονια*, in this passage, means a stated office also. But as he considers the office of the deacon to be specially mentioned under the designation of “*ὁ μεταδιδους*,” *He that giveth*—so he is at a loss to know what stated office the word *διακονια* is intended to express. He supposes that it may mean “*perhaps the bishop’s ministry*.”—It is a sufficient answer to this supposition to state, that there was no person at that period known by the title of “*the bishop*.” I have already shown, that the title *bishop*, or *overseer*, was applied indiscriminately to all elders—both those that taught, and those that merely ruled. According to this view, “*the bishop’s ministry*” was nothing more than the ministry of the elders ; and as both the

“teacher” and the “ruler” are separately mentioned in the passage under review, so the word *διακονια* here cannot be applicable to either of them; otherwise it would not express a distinct office, which is what, Macknight himself affirms, it means.

Beza, in his note on this passage, supposes that the apostle here comprehends all the ordinary ecclesiastical functions under the two general heads of prophesying and ministry; and that in what follows he describes, first, the kinds of prophesying—and, secondly, the kinds of ministry. Under the first of these heads (prophesying) he includes the teacher, *ὁ διδασκων*, and the exhorter *ὁ παρακαλων*. Under the second head (ministry) he includes the distribution of the church’s bounty, *ὁ μεταδιδους*; the ruling elder, *ὁ προϊσταμενος*; and the attendant upon the afflicted, *ὁ ελεων*. This is Beza’s arrangement of the passage; and the same view is adopted by the learned authors of the *Divine right of church government*. Though, according to this arrangement, the office of the deacon is distinctly recognised under the head of ministry, in the person who distributes, yet the arrangement itself may be considered as arbitrary and illogical. It is *arbitrary*, inasmuch as the grammatical structure of the passage does not furnish the slightest foundation for it; for the structure of the passage is such,



that each consecutive clause appears obviously designed to express the exercise of a distinct office or a separate gift : And it is also *illogical*, for propheysing might with equal propriety be called a branch of teaching, as teaching is said to be a branch of propheysing ; and there is no good reason why teaching and exhorting should be included under the head of propheysing, rather than under the head of ministry.

The most natural method of interpreting the passage is to view each clause as expressive of a different office, for the right discharge of the duties of which a particular gift was necessary. This view accords best with the grammatical structure of the passage, as well as with the introductory statement, where the apostle says—"Having then gifts *differing according to the grace*, χαριν (some interpret this term *office*) that is given to us." Then to show what the offices are, for which these different gifts have been conferred, he adds—"Whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith ; or the office of a deacon, let us attend to our deaconship," &c.—εἴτε διακονίαν, ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ. In confirmation of this view, I would remark, that διακονία is the term which is employed, in Acts vi. 1, to describe the "daily ministration," for the superintending of which the deacons were appointed. It is therefore a term



descriptive of their office : And in the second verse of the same chapter, the work to which they were required to attend, is said to be *διακονειν τραπεζας* “to serve tables.” Schleusner, after giving various meanings of the word *διακονια*, says that it signifies “*by way of distinction* the distribution and administration of charitable funds for the use of the poor ;” —and he quotes Acts vi. 1, in support of this use of the term. Doddridge, in his exposition of Rom. xii. 7, gives the following paraphrase of the clause on which I have been commenting—“ Or (having) the office of ministry, as deacons, let a man employ himself actively and faithfully in his ministration” He adds in a note, “ The word *διακονια* properly signifies the ministration of a deacon, and so interpreted gives the distinctest sense.” From the statements now made, I feel myself warranted in drawing the conclusion, that the office of deacon is distinctly mentioned in Rom. xii. 7, as among the number of those offices, which God has appointed in the church.

Another passage (to which I have previously referred) where the apostle gives an enumeration of office-bearers, is 1 Cor. xii. 28. In this enumeration, the office of deacon is also distinctly mentioned—“ God hath set some in the church, first, apostles ; secondarily, prophets ; thirdly, teachers ; after that

miracles ; then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." I formerly stated,<sup>1</sup> that some of these were extraordinary, and designed only to be temporary—and that others were ordinary, and designed to be of permanent continuance. The extraordinary office-bearers were prophets — apostles — workers of miracles—those who possessed the gift of healing—and diversities of tongues. The ordinary office-bearers were teachers — governments — helps. The teachers and governments are the teaching and ruling elders : And the " helps" *αντιληψεις* are the deacons, who are designated *helps* or *assistants*, because they were appointed for the special purpose of relieving the elders from the onerous duties connected with the management of the funds, that were raised for supplying the wants of the poor. I shall quote some authorities to show, that by the term *αντιληψεις* deacons are to be understood. Schleusner gives the meaning of the word in this place to be "*munus diaconorum primitivæ ecclesiæ, qui curam pauperum et ægrotorum gorebant*" — *the office of the deacons of the primitive church, who had the charge of the poor and the sick*. Beza, in a note on this verse, calls *αντιληψεις* "*diaconorum functiones*" — *the func-*

<sup>1</sup> See p. 87.

*tions of the deacons.* Doddridge paraphrases the word by “helpers in the management of charities.” Calvin says that these “*helps* were either an ancient gift and office unknown to us now, or it belongs to the deaconship, that is, the care of the poor. And this second (he adds) rather pleaseth me.” Gillespie, in the remarks which he makes upon this verse, considers the apostle as distinctly referring by this term, to the office of the deacon.<sup>1</sup> That this office is one which God has appointed, is what the apostle expressly affirms; for he says—“God hath set (*εθετο*) these helps in the church.”

*Thirdly,* In the platform of ecclesiastical discipline, laid down by Paul in his epistles to Timothy, the directions, given with regard to the office of the deacon, are no less explicit than those that are given with regard to the office of the elder. In his directions, the apostle takes for granted that such an office did exist in the church. He points out minutely the qualifications, which deacons ought to possess, and the manner in which they ought to discharge the duties of their office. He speaks of them as an order of men that already existed—and as one with which the people were familiar:—“Likewise

<sup>1</sup> Aaron's Rod Blossoming, p. 222.

(says he) must the deacons be grave, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre ; holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience ;” 1 Tim. iii. 8, 9. He states, that “ they who have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus ;” ver. 13. Where we find the Holy Spirit giving directions concerning the duties of any office, and bestowing commendation on those who discharge the duties of it well, we are warranted in regarding that office as of divine appointment. The passages now quoted show that this is the case with regard to the office of the deacon.

*Fourthly,* There is good ground for concluding, that in point of fact there were deacons, as well as elders, in all the churches ; and that the former class of office-bearers were considered no less necessary to the complete organisation of a church than the latter. In the church at Jerusalem, we know, there were both deacons and elders. Acts vi. 5 and xv. 1. In the church at Rome, there were deacons and elders. Rom. xii. 7 8. These two classes of office-bearers were also in the church at Corinth. 1 Cor. xii. 28. They were also in the church at Ephesus, as we learn from the directions given to Timothy—first

epistle and third chapter. At the time when Timothy received these directions, he was labouring in the church at Ephesus ; and he was to take care that every thing was done according to apostolical direction. Mention is also made of these two classes being in the church at Philippi ; for Paul, in commencing his epistle to that church, addresses it “ to all the saints in Christ Jesus, which are at Philippi, with the overseers (or elders) and deacons.”—That there were deacons in the five churches now mentioned we have scriptural evidence for believing.

Further, we have unexceptionable evidence, that the appointment, by the apostles, of deacons in the churches, was as general as the appointment of elders. The evidence, which I am about to quote, though not exactly scriptural, is the evidence of one who was a companion of Paul and a fellow-labourer with the apostles. It is that of Clemens Romanus. In a passage from his epistle to the Corinthians—which I have already quoted on the subject of the eldership<sup>1</sup>—he says—“ The apostles, preaching through countries and cities, appointed their first-fruits bishops (overseers) and deacons of those who should believe, proving them by the Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Ac-

<sup>1</sup> See page 113.

<sup>2</sup> Epist. ad Cor. p. 54.

ording to this account, the deacons were as universally appointed as the overseers.

*Fifthly*, I may mention that abundant proof is to be found, in the writings of the early Fathers, of there being deacons appointed in all the churches, during the ages that immediately succeeded the apostolical era. In addition to Clemens—we have Polycarp, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Cyprian, and several others that might be mentioned, bearing testimony on this point. It is altogether unnecessary to make quotations. Indeed, the greater part of the quotations, which I have made from the Fathers on the subject of the eldership, are equally applicable as proofs of the existence of the office of the deacon.

Having thus endeavoured to show that this office is one which is sanctioned by divine authority, I shall now advert to the duties which the deacon is required to discharge. Preaching and ruling form no part of these duties; for it appears from the language employed by the apostles, when they instituted this office, that they considered preaching and the duties of the deacon to be incompatible with each other. They said, “It is not meet that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables:”—thereby intimating, that they could not give themselves to the preaching of the word, and at the same time attend

to the “daily ministrations” in behalf of the poor. What they proposed, by instituting the office of the deacon, was to separate these two departments of duty—devolving them on different classes of office-bearers. They said to the multitude of disciples—“Look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business: But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” It is indeed affirmed of Philip, who was elected one of the deacons, that he preached. But it is not affirmed of him that he preached, *while he was a deacon*. After having been for some time a deacon—he was set apart to the office of an evangelist, in which work he appears to have been eminently successful. He is called “Philip the evangelist” (Acts xxi. 8); and a slight degree of attention will suffice to show, that his labours in this capacity were altogether incompatible with discharging the duties of a deacon. For, in the brief account given of him, we find him first labouring in the city of Samaria—then travelling “toward the south” by divine command, to meet the Ethiopian eunuch on his way home from Jerusalem—and lastly, we find him residing with his family in Cesarea, and doing the work of an evangelist in that city. How could

he attend to the poor in Jerusalem, or anywhere else, when he was thus engaged in travelling about from place to place? Nor does the case of Stephen form any exception to the statement, which I have been making, concerning preaching not being any part of the work of a deacon. It does not appear that Stephen preached. He “did great wonders and miracles among the people”—and he occasionally entered the lists of disputation against the opponents of the gospel. But this was very different from public preaching: and it formed no part of his work as a deacon. To reason or dispute with those who are the enemies of the faith, is what any private Christian may do.

As deacons were not ordained to the work of preaching, so neither were they required to act as rulers in the church. In those passages, where the office of deacon is referred to, it is mentioned as distinct from that of the ruler. As instances of this, I refer to the passages quoted above. Thus, in Rom. xii. 7, 8, “He that hath the office of a *deacon*, let him wait on his deaconship”—“He that *ruleth*, let him do it with diligence.” In 1 Cor. xii. 28, “God hath set in the church *helps—governments*.” In Phil. i. 1, “*Overseers and deacons*.” In 1 Tim. iii. 2, 8, “An *overseer* must be blameless”—“Likewise must the



*deacons* be grave." The circumstance now noticed of these two offices being mentioned as distinct, even when they are mentioned in connexion with each other, shows us that the work of ruling was not connected with the office of a deacon. For if the deacon had been appointed to rule, then there would have been no distinction between him and the overseer or elder; and there would have been no propriety in the apostle so frequently introducing them to our notice, as distinct offices, when they were in reality the same. That the deacons were not included among the number of those that ruled in the church, is fairly deducible from the fact now stated. Whatever innovations might afterwards be introduced, when men began to deviate from the primitive order which had been established by the apostles, there is no countenance given in the New Testament either to preaching deacons—or ruling deacons. Those deacons who preach or rule, or who—it may be—do both, step beyond the limits of their office. They exercise functions which they have no warrant, by virtue of their office, to exercise. They exalt themselves to the rank of teaching or of ruling elders: And should they, while they thus exercise the function of *overseers*, assume the title of *deacons*, they are not taking a scriptural designation. This latter title

is never applied, in the New Testament,—so far as I know—to an office-bearer who preaches or rules. It is the term “overseer” or “elder” which is the scriptural designation of such an individual. The object, for which the office of the deacon was instituted, is distinctly mentioned; and the duty of the deacon is limited to this specific object.

The “serving of tables” is mentioned as the “business” over which the first deacons were appointed. “It is not reason,” said the apostles, addressing the multitude of the disciples, “that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint *over this business*.” There is no other business but this mentioned, or even referred to. It is the simple and sole object of the institution of the deacon’s office. What, then, is the business that is here expressed by “serving tables?” The nature of it sufficiently appears from the complaint that was made by the Grecians against the Hebrews; namely, that “their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.” This phrase—*the daily ministration*—is explained by the statement contained in Acts iv. 34, 35, where it is said,—“Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were

possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need." The "daily ministration" and the "distribution" now mentioned were the same. The *ministration*, *διακονια*, was nothing else than the "distribution made unto every man according as he had need," out of the money which the wealthier converts brought, in the abundance of their liberality, and laid down at the apostles' feet. To take charge of this distribution is what we are to understand by *serving tables*; and "over this business" were the deacons appointed. The phrase, "to serve tables,"—as employed by the apostles in the passage under consideration—has no reference whatever either to providing or distributing the sacramental elements at the table of the Lord; nor does it apply to intromitting generally with the pecuniary affairs of the church. The connexion, in which it stands, limits it to taking charge of the funds collected for relief of the indigent, and to the distribution of these funds.

The office of the deacon, then, has been instituted for the special purpose of attending to the wants of the poor. The proper business of those who are

invested with this office, is to take charge of and distribute the funds, which every christian society ought to have for relieving the wants of its poorer members. But though attending to the wants of the poor appears to have been the *special* purpose for which the office of the deacon was instituted, yet it is highly probable that other objects besides this occupied the attention of the deacons—such as the raising and distribution of the funds necessary for the maintenance of a gospel ministry, and for other pious purposes. In the church at Jerusalem there was only one fund, as is evident from the passage which has been quoted from the fourth chapter of the Acts. This fund was available for all the purposes of the association. Every man had his wants supplied out of it “according as he had need.” Those who laboured in the gospel ministry would receive their support from it; and whatever expenses, of an incidental kind, were incurred in promoting the great objects for which the Christians were associated in church fellowship—these also would be defrayed out of the same source:—and to the deacons it belonged, by virtue of their office, to take charge of the distribution of this fund. In all the other churches that were formed, provision was made, by the liberality of the members, for supply-

ing the wants of the poor—for supporting a gospel ministry—and for maintaining in a state of efficiency the various institutions of the christian religion. The funds necessary for the accomplishing of these objects would be placed at the disposal of the deacons; and to them, acting (as we shall afterwards see) under the superintendence of the eldership, it belonged to see that the funds were applied to their proper purposes. In the subsequent remarks which I shall make in this chapter concerning the office of the deacon, I shall confine myself to what I conceive to have been the main design for which this office was instituted in the christian church, namely, attending to the wants of the poor.

It affords a great display of benevolence, on the part of the Author of Christianity, that he should have instituted in his church an office, for the purpose of ministering to the wants of the indigent. Very soon after the age of the apostles, the deacons began to be employed in a variety of other services, besides that of attending to the poor. They assisted in administering the Lord's Supper—distributing the sacramental elements to those who were present—and sometimes carrying them to those who were absent. They were permitted occasionally to preach and to baptize. They acted as directors to

the people when engaged in the public services of the sanctuary—giving notice, by certain forms of words, when each part of the service began. They gave notice also to the penitents and catechumens when to come up and make their prayers, and when to depart. Besides these, there were services of a still more menial kind which they performed ;—such as acting the part of door-keepers—taking charge of the communion table and the vessels belonging to it—receiving the offerings of the people, and presenting them to the minister, to be by him laid upon the altar.<sup>1</sup> Such things as these were innovations gradually introduced, and for which Scripture furnishes no warrant. The word of God points out no other employment, as peculiar to the office of the deacon, except that of ministering the church's bounty to the poor.

That this office was designed to be permanent, may be argued from the minute directions given concerning it, in the first epistle to Timothy. We have there pointed out the qualifications which those persons ought to possess who are called to occupy this office—and there is great encouragement held out to deacons to be faithful in discharging the duties

<sup>1</sup> Bingham's *Origines Ecclesiasticæ*, b. ii. chap. xx.

connected with their office. The same circumstance, also, which rendered the appointment of this office necessary at the first, renders its continuance necessary ; and that is the obligation which lies upon the church to make provision for supplying the wants of the indigent. It was not more necessary that there should be a class of office-bearers appointed for the special purpose of attending to the poor, at the commencement of Christianity, than that there should be a class of office-bearers appointed for attending to the poor at the present day. If there were obligations lying upon the church to make provision for the wants of the indigent then—there are obligations lying upon the church to make provision for the wants of the same class still.

The views given by the compilers of that excellent production, the Westminster Confession of Faith, concerning the nature and permanence of the office of the deacon, coincide with those which I have advanced. “The Scripture (they say) doth hold out deacons as distinct officers in the church : whose office is *perpetual* : To whose office it belongs not to preach the word, or administer the sacraments, but to take special care in distributing to the necessities of the poor.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Westminster Confession, p. 572.

The United Associate Synod, in the Summary of Principles adopted in September 1820, declare that “The office-bearers in the church of Christ are teaching and ruling elders, and deacons.” Stewart of Pardovan, in his Collection, says—“The word (deacon) is sometimes largely taken for all that bear ministry and spiritual function in the church; but commonly it is taken for that ordinary and perpetual ecclesiastical office in the kirk of Christ, to whom the collection and distribution of the alms of the faithful and ecclesiastical goods do belong. Whence it follows, that seeing this office is of divine institution, it is an unwarrantable omission in some congregations, that either they put no difference betwixt the elders and deacons, or else they neglect to appoint any to the office of a deacon.”<sup>1</sup>

Though the Westminster Confession of Faith, to which all the presbyterian churches in this country subscribe their adherence, declares the deaconship to be a distinct office from that of the elder—to be of divine institution—and to be perpetual—yet a large proportion of these churches subject themselves to the censure pronounced by Stewart of Pardovan, in the extract now made, when he says

<sup>1</sup> Chap. Of the Policy of the Kirk.



that “it is an unwarrantable omission in some congregations, that either they put no difference betwixt the elders and deacons, or else they neglect to appoint any to the office of a deacon.” So far as the writer of these pages is aware of—the office of deacon has become nearly extinct in the various sections of the presbyterian church.<sup>1</sup> In comparatively few of the presbyterian congregations is such an office-bearer to be found. A late eminent writer, in noticing this omission, and in endeavouring to account for it, makes the following apology for those congregations where the omission exists:—“In some parts of the church the office of deacon is retained, but in others it is not; and the want of it has been represented as a criminal omission. But the institution arose out of particular circumstances, and may therefore be dispensed with where these do not exist. In some congregations there are no poor; in others, they are very few in number; and where they most abound, they can be attended to by the elders, whom we acknowledge as office-bearers in the church, as we shall afterwards see; and who,

<sup>1</sup> The writer excepts from this statement the congregations that have recently seceded from the Scottish Establishment, under the designation of the Free Protestant Church. In these congregations he understands that the office of the deacon has been universally revived.

on the principle that an inferior office is comprehended in a superior, possess the powers of deacons, as ministers possess the powers of elders. This is our apology for not having deacons in all our congregations, and it seems to be satisfactory. They are not appointed, because all that they could do can be done by the elders, without encroaching upon their other duties.”<sup>1</sup>

This statement, no doubt, accounts for the want of deacons in many of the congregations; but it can scarcely be regarded as a satisfactory apology for the omission. For, in the first place, though the institution of the office of deacon “arose out of particular circumstances,” yet the continuance of it in the church was not made to depend on these circumstances. Sufficient evidence has been adduced to show that the office was universally adopted in the primitive church, and that it was designed by God to be permanent. And, secondly, if this apology be satisfactory, when urged by congregations as a reason for dispensing with the office of deacon—it will be equally satisfactory when urged by them as a reason for dispensing, in certain circumstances, with the office of the ruling elder. For many cases are to be

<sup>1</sup> Lectures on Theology; by the Rev. Dr Dick, vol. iv. p. 378.

found of the members of a congregation being so few, that the minister can have little difficulty in doing the whole work of ruling as well as of teaching; and, “on the principle that an inferior office is comprehended in a superior,” he may dispense with the services of the elders, as well as of the deacons. No good presbyterian would regard it as a sufficient reason for not having ruling elders in a congregation, because the membership was small: and why should it be regarded as a sufficient reason, for not having deacons in a congregation, that the poor are few in number—and that the elders are able not only to attend to their own duties, but also to do the work of the deacons. If the one office be of divine institution as well as the other—and if it be designed also to be permanent—I do not see on what grounds presbyterian congregations are warranted, in any circumstances, in dispensing with the one more than the other.

The New Testament furnishes sufficient evidence that the primitive Christians were enjoined by the highest authority to make provision—by pecuniary contribution—for the relief of their indigent brethren. Among the little band of disciples that followed Christ during his personal ministry upon earth, there was a fund established and contributions made for

the poor ; John xiii. 29. And Jesus reminded them that this duty was one to which they would always be required to attend, by saying to them, “ The poor always ye have with you ;” John xii. 8. After the christian church was organised, the apostles did not forget the instructions which had been given, and the example which had been set by their divine Master on this point. They required all who joined their society to act in a similar spirit : and they gave very definite instructions on the subject, which were applicable to all the members of the church, in every part of the world. “ As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, *especially* unto them who are of the household of faith ;” Gal. vi. 10. “ Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye : Upon the first day of the week, let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come ;” 1 Cor. xvi. 1, 2. This was a general direction given to all the churches, in so far as the contribution for the poor saints at Jerusalem was concerned : for we find that the collection referred to was made by the churches in Macedonia and Achaia, as well as by those of Galatia and Corinth ; Rom. xv. 26. That this collecting for the poor was reduced to a

system by the apostles—and that all the churches were required to act in accordance with it—appears from a statement made by Paul, in Gal. ii. 10, where, after giving an account of an interview which he had with Peter, James, and John, and of a friendly agreement made with these persons, that Barnabas and Paul should go and preach to the heathen, while these three apostles laboured among the Jews, he adds—“ Only they would that we should remember the poor ; the same which I also was forward to do.” Paul, writing to the churches, reminded the converts of the necessity of being industrious in their lawful callings, that they might have it in their power to give a part of their earnings for the support of the poor :—“ Let him that stole, steal no more ; but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, *that he may have to give to him that needeth ;*” Eph. iv. 28.

Such were the principles on which the primitive Christians were enjoined to act ; and the office of the deacon was instituted, that there might be in every congregation persons whose special business it was to superintend the distribution of the money that was thus raised by the voluntary liberality of the people. Dr Dwight, in his *System of Theology*, makes the following excellent remarks on this subject:

—“ If we had no other directions concerning this subject in the sacred volume, the history, contained in the text (Acts vi. 1–6), would be amply sufficient. *The very purpose for which the office (of deacon) was instituted in the christian church, was the distribution of its alms :* an employment highly honourable and evangelical. That this employment was to be universal in the church, and that its poor members were always to receive the benefit of it, is clearly taught in the 5th chapter of the first epistle to Timothy, by the directions given concerning the reception of widows into the number of the poor, supported by the church.”—“ Private bounty was to be given to the necessitous by the authors of it, at their own pleasure : but the bounty of the church was to flow through its deacons, as its own proper almoners. The primitive Christians obeyed the injunctions, requiring this duty, in a manner becoming their profession. They received their fellow-Christians, when travelling, into their houses ; and made them welcome to such accommodations as their circumstances permitted. They continually made feasts of charity, to which every Christian present was of course invited ; raised weekly contributions and conveyed them to their necessitous brethren by officers, whose especial business it was to see that all were

impartially and effectually relieved. With a similar care and benevolence, they administered relief to sufferers in every other situation.

“ This conduct, being a novelty in the world, and no less honourable than beneficial, strongly attracted the attention of the heathen ; and extorted from them this high proverbial commendation : ‘ See, how these Christians love one another.’ The emperor Julian, an apostate from christianity, and therefore a bitter enemy to it, acknowledges the fact, in terms extremely honourable to the cause, which he so earnestly laboured to destroy. ‘ If (said he) Hellenism,’ that is, the religion of the heathen, ‘ does not prosper according to our wish, it is the fault of those who profess it. Why do we not look to that, which has been the principal cause of the augmentation of impiety ;’ that is, the christian religion ; ‘ humanity to strangers, care in burying the dead, and that sanctity of life, of which they make such a show ? It is a shame, that, when the impious Galileans,’ that is, Christians, ‘ relieve not only their own people, but ours also, our poor should be neglected by us.’ Again he says, ‘ it having so happened, as I suppose, that the poor were neglected by our priests, the impious Galileans, observing this, have addicted themselves to this kind of humanity ; and by the



show of such good offices, have recommended the worst of things ;' that is, the christian religion. ' For beginning with their love feasts, and the ministry of tables, as they call it (for not only the name, but the thing is common among them), they have drawn away the faithful to impiety ;' that is, heathens to christianity. We have here the strongest evidence that the ancient Christians, down to the time of Julian, maintained the charity of the gospel to their poor and suffering brethren, and to strangers, also ; and that this charity was distributed in conformity to the account in the text ; the ministry of tables being mentioned by him as one of the principal channels through which it flowed." <sup>1</sup>

Christians are as much bound by the law of Christ, in the present day, to make provision for supplying the wants of their indigent brethren, as they were in the days of the apostles ; and the christian society, which makes no exertion to afford relief to those who are justly objects of its sympathy, is not fulfilling the duty imposed upon it by its Lord. Every congregation ought to have a fund for affording relief to its indigent members ; and regular stated contributions ought to be made for the maintenance of this

<sup>1</sup> Dwight's System of Theology, vol. ii. pp. 511, 512.



fund. “The poor always ye have with you”—said the Saviour. This is indeed true. The poor will always be found in the land. A certain portion of them will be found in every congregation, and the duty which christianity enjoins on each congregation, concerning the poor connected with it, is to give them support. The provision made for them should be such as not merely to keep them from a state of starvation—but to enable them to experience a certain measure of comfort. This is a duty which the church, as a body, owes to its individual members. “Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it;” 1 Cor. xii. 26. “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?” James ii. 15, 16.

To the scriptural scheme, of every church making provision for its own poor, by the voluntary contribution of its members, some object that this is unnecessary, on account of a legal provision being made by the state for the maintenance of the poor. This objection is more specious than valid. I apprehend that no civil enactment, which the state

may make on this subject, can exempt Christians from what is enjoined on them as a religious duty—namely, the duty of giving a portion of their earnings to assist in supporting their poorer brethren. If what they ought to give freely, for this purpose, be extorted from them, by a civil enactment, it becomes compulsory; and in this case it ceases to be the exercise of christian charity. But it is as an expression of christian love, that they are required to give; and if it be not given in this way, the duty is not fulfilled.

Another objection to the scriptural scheme is, that there are many persons sunk in the deepest poverty and wretchedness, whom no religious society acknowledges. On account of their vices and profligacy, they have become outcasts from all christian communion. Are such persons to be left to perish? Certainly not. How, then, are they to be provided for? Christian benevolence should extend to them: and while each church charges itself with the maintenance of its own poor, there ought to be—in reference to those who are connected with no particular church—a scheme of co-operation among the various christian societies, in every locality, with a view to give relief to such. *Christian principle* should do the work of mercy here, as well as in the

case of those who are members of the church ;—though reason would say, that those who have been pursuing a vicious course, and have brought poverty upon themselves by a life of profligacy, ought not to share so liberally in the fruits of christian beneficence, as those who have led quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty. Such ought to be made to feel—at least to a certain extent—the retributive effects of their own criminality.

As there ought, then, to be a fund in every congregation, for the support of the poor, so the fund should be placed under the management of the proper scriptural office-bearers, namely, deacons. The office of the deacon has been instituted by Christ for this purpose : and why should Christians profess to be wiser than the Saviour, by refusing to adopt an organization which he has appointed. It is indeed true, that in every presbyterian congregation there are elders—and why may not they be entrusted with the distribution of the funds collected for the benefit of the poor ? The answer to this question is two-fold : First, that Christ has appointed a class of office-bearers for the special purpose of attending to this work ; and, secondly, the elders have a work of their own to perform, which is of such importance, that it requires them to devote to it all the energies

both of their mind and body. This work is attending to the spiritual interests of the flock. “He that ruleth, let him do it with diligence.”—“Give thyself *wholly* to these things”—is an injunction no less applicable to ruling, than to teaching elders. Besides, the union of the offices of the elder and of the deacon, in the same person, is calculated to operate injuriously, by preventing his spiritual ministrations from producing any good effect—inasmuch as a spirit of hostility is apt to be excited against him, on the part of those whose clamorous demands for relief he may sometimes be obliged, when acting in his capacity as a deacon, to refuse.

Dr Chalmers has shown this, in his *Christian and Civic Economy of large towns*, with a force of reasoning and a power of eloquence which must bring conviction to every mind. Speaking of the union of the offices of the elder and of the deacon in the same person, he says :—“Like a substance, where neither of the ingredients taken singly is poisonous, and which assumes all its virulence from the composition of them, what a power of insidious but most fatal corruption lies in the mere junction of these two offices ! There is many a pluralist of this sort, who never can and never will verify this remark, by any experience of his own ; because he has virtually

resigned the better and the higher of his functions, or rather has not once from the beginning exercised them. But let him go forth upon his territory, in the discharge of both, and what a sickening duplicity of reception he is exposed to ! What a mortifying indifference to the topic he has most at heart, under all the constrained appearance of attention which is rendered to it ! With what dexterity can the language of sanctity be pressed into the service, when their purpose requires it ; and yet how evident, how mortifyingly evident, often, is the total absence of all feeling and desire upon the subject, from the hearts of those wily politicians ! How often, under such an unfortunate arrangement as this, is christianity prostituted into a vehicle for the most sordid and unworthy applications—all its lessons no further valued than for the mean and beggarly elements with which they are conjoined—and all its ordinances no further valued than as stepping-stones, perhaps, to a pair of shoes. It is this mingling together of incompatible desires—it is this bringing of a pure moral element into contiguity with other elements which vitiate and extinguish it—it is this compounding of what is fitted in itself to raise the character, with what is fitted, in itself, and still more by its hypocritical association with better things, to adul-

terate and debase it—it is this which sheds a kind of withering blight over all the ministrations of the pluralist, and must convince every enlightened observer, that, till he gets rid of the many elements of temptation which are in his hands, he will never expatiate, either with christian comfort, or with christian effect, among the population.”

Such, he says, will be the effect produced, where the funds for the poor are raised by voluntary contribution, and distributed by the elders. He then goes on to show that matters will be still worse, “when the fund is raised in a legal and compulsory way by assessment, and when that which went to be petitioned for, in the shape of charity, is demanded in the shape of justice.”—“A kirk-session may do for an organ of distribution, while the expression of good-will may be held forth, on the one side, and the feeling of gratitude may be called back, on the other. But when, from an administration of charity, it is transformed into a warfare of rights, it becomes altogether an unseemly contest for such parties as these—and a contest, in which the cupidity, and the love of pleasure, or of indolence, that characterise our nature, will mightily prevail over that unpractised simplicity, which we should ever like to characterise our eldership; whose proper business it is

to officiate among sacraments, and to exert a christian superintendence over the families that are assigned to them." He then adds—"Let us now conceive a pluralist to be aware of this mischief, and, by way of guarding against it, to put himself forth in an attitude more characteristic of deaconship—firm in resistance to every claim that is capable of being reduced, and most strict and resolute in all his investigations. In this case, the only fit and effectual attitude of eldership must be given up. He may as well try to look two opposite ways, at the same moment, as think of combining the one with the other, and of keeping the people at bay by his resistance to them, on the ground of his lower, and, at the same time, drawing their regard, on the ground of his higher and better ministrations. He will find it utterly impossible to find access for the lessons of christianity, into hearts soured against himself, and, perhaps, thwarted in their feelings of justice, by the disappointments they have gotten at his hand. It is thus that, by a strange fatality, the man who has been vested with a religious superintendence over the people, has become the most unlikely for gaining a religious influence over them—and all his wonted powers of usefulness, now worse than neutralised, have, by the positive dislike that has been turned



against him, been sunk far beneath the level of any private or ordinary individual. There cannot, surely, be a more complete travesty on all that is wise and desirable in human institutions, than to saddle that man, whose primitive office it is to woo the people to that which is spiritually good, with another office where he has to war against the people, on the subject of their temporalities.”<sup>1</sup>

Such remarks as these tend to illustrate the evils that arise from the same individual sustaining the two-fold character of an elder and a deacon, and show the wisdom of the Saviour in appointing two classes of office-bearers—one class, to discharge the duties of the elder,—and another, to discharge the duties of the deacon.

As the deacons are not appointed to rule, so they are not to be considered as members of the session, or, as having a right to sit in any of the higher ecclesiastical courts. They are themselves subject, as members of the church, to the session. It is, however, not only proper, but necessary, that they meet from time to time with the elders, to deliberate, along with them, concerning those matters—the management of which has been entrusted to their

<sup>1</sup> Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns, vol. i. pp. 257-262.



charge. Though attending to the poor ought to be the chief object of their concern—as this is the specific work for which they have been appointed by the great Head of the church—yet it will not be altogether foreign to the duties of their office, should they have entrusted to their management those funds, that may be raised for the maintenance of gospel ordinances—and should they exert themselves in devising ways and means for calling forth the pecuniary resources of the church, with a view to the vigorous and successful prosecution of those religious and philanthropic schemes which constitute the glory of the times in which we live.

## CHAPTER VIII.

Inadequate views entertained of the office of the eldership—  
Inefficient manner in which the duties of it are performed by many—Honourable exceptions to this statement—Promising symptom of the present times connected with the eldership—  
Practical suggestions for the consideration of elders—Their conduct viewed in relation to the presbytery—Their conduct as members of session—The duty that they owe to the young—  
Their conduct viewed in relation to missionary exertion—The part that they ought to take in the general management of the affairs of the congregation—A plea for the revival of the office of deacon—The duties of the ruling elder and of the deacon viewed in relation to each other—The office of the latter subordinate and auxiliary to the office of the former.

IN this chapter I propose stating some suggestions of a practical kind, for the consideration of the brethren in the eldership, which, by the blessing of God, may be the means of increasing their usefulness as office-bearers in the house of God. I am convinced that the full amount of benefit, which such an institution as that of the eldership is capable of conferring on the christian church, has not yet been realised. The apostle of the Gentiles said, "I magnify mine office." This cannot be affirmed of the mass of those who have been invested with the office of

ruling elder. Comparatively few of them magnify their office. They rather under-rate its importance ; and by the manner in which they act, they lead others to under-rate it also. The Head of the church has invested them with high authority as overseers in his house, and he has promised to sustain them in the scriptural exercise of this authority.

When I look at the actual working of the eldership in the various presbyterian churches, I see, on the part of a considerable proportion of those who occupy this responsible situation, a sad deficiency of energy and activity in their work. Instead of taking an enlarged view of the duties of their office, and instead of devoting themselves to the vigorous discharge of these duties, with the view of bringing their influence to bear upon the various departments of christian beneficence, they confine themselves for the most part within a very limited sphere of operation. They thereby greatly abridge the range of their usefulness, and come far short of what the exigencies of the church demand. I do not under-rate the amount of official duty performed by the generality of elders, when I say, that it consists in collecting the voluntary offerings of the people at the church doors upon Sabbath, in discussing cases of discipline in the session, in taking charge of the

communion elements at sacramental occasions, and in occasional visitation of the sick. However necessary it may be to attend to these things, yet it must be obvious to any one who peruses attentively the statements contained in the apostolical writings concerning the duties of the eldership, that they fall far short of what this class of office-bearers is required to perform. *Acting the part of shepherds to the flock—Watching for souls—and Taking care of the church of God*—are some of the expressions employed to describe the nature of the work connected with the office of the ruling elder ; and these expressions certainly imply a great deal more than the meagre outline of routine duty that has now been mentioned. They imply a vigilant and unremitting attention to every thing that has a tendency to promote either the temporal or the spiritual well-being of the flock.

While I make these statements, I am aware that there are many elders connected with the churches in this country who are animated by a high degree of zeal for the promoting of the divine glory, and who are active and faithful in discharging the duties of their office. These men are the salt of the congregations to which they belong ; and it is difficult to over-estimate the amount of good which—humble though their station in life may be—they are instru-

mental in accomplishing. To them belongs the “double honour,” of which Paul speaks,—because they rule well. It is desirable that the whole body of the eldership be brought up to a higher pitch of efficiency than even the best of them have yet attained—and that a greater amount of energy and zeal be displayed by them in discharging the varied and important duties connected with their honourable calling. The church has a right to expect from them the full amount of benefit which such an excellent institution is fitted to yield.

It is a favourable symptom, connected with the present times, that in many quarters the elders themselves are making a movement in advance. They are manifesting a greater anxiety, both to be instructed in the duties of their office, and also to carry out the great designs for which such an office has been instituted in the christian church. They are stirring up each other to increased activity in their Master’s service; and not a few of them are to be seen stepping forward and occupying a place in the foremost rank of those philanthropic men, who, by the zeal and liberality which they display in every good work, are earning to themselves a title to be regarded as the benefactors of their species. The impulse having thus been given in the right direc-

tion, it is to be hoped that it will continue to increase until its salutary influence shall have extended to the elders in all the churches—when, in consequence of their sustained and persevering efforts, combined with the labours of a faithful ministry, all our congregations may be expected to present to the eye the appearance of well-watered gardens, and of fields which the Lord hath blessed.

I shall now state some practical suggestions, designed to bear upon the working of the eldership; and these suggestions I shall arrange, for the sake of perspicuity, under the following particulars:—The conduct of the ruling elder viewed in relation to the presbytery—in relation to the session—in relation to the superintendence of the young—in relation to missionary exertion—and in relation to the general management of the affairs of the congregation.

1. The conduct of the ruling elder viewed in relation to the presbytery. The presbytery is an association of ministers and elders residing in a particular locality—the meetings of which are held with a view to the transacting of business connected with their respective congregations, and also with the general interests of the church. Much important business is transacted in these meetings. The organisation of congregations—the superintendence of

the studies of candidates for the office of the ministry—the licensing of preachers—the settlement of ministers—the oversight of the conduct of the brethren—the giving of advice to sessions in cases of difficulty—the review of differences that may arise between the session and members of particular congregations—the devising and executing of schemes designed to promote the interests of education, and to advance the cause of religion—constitute the important objects to which the elders assembled in presbytery are required to devote their time and attention. With regard to the constitution of the presbytery, the ordinary practice of the presbyterian churches in this country has been, that one ruling elder is appointed by each session to act as representative of the session, in the meetings of presbytery, along with the minister. Between the status of the minister and the status of the elder in the presbytery, there is this difference : the minister is regarded as a permanent member—whereas the appointment of the elder is only for a limited period. After he has given attendance, during the period for which he was appointed, he retires, and is succeeded by another elder belonging to the same session ;—and he, in his turn, retires and is succeeded by another—and so on, till all the elders in the session have been

appointed to act as members of presbytery. The usual mode in which the appointment is made is to appoint the elders to succeed one another *in rotation*, without any regard to their peculiar fitness for such an appointment.

The principle of elders meeting in presbytery, by representation, must be defended more on the ground of convenience or of expediency, than because it is in accordance with scripture precedent. There are two instances mentioned in the sacred record of the elders of Jerusalem assembling for judicial acts; and on both occasions they were *all present*. (Acts xv. 6, and xxi. 18.) That the elders who assembled on these occasions, though constituting only one body, were numerous—and that they had the charge of several congregations connected with the church at Jerusalem, may fairly be inferred from the circumstance stated by them, in their interview with Paul (Acts xxi. 20), that there were in Jerusalem “many thousands of Jews” who believed. In the original it is *many tens of thousands* (ποσαι μυριαδες). If there were many tens of thousands who had embraced Christianity in Jerusalem, it is beyond the bounds of all reasonable probability that such a multitude could constitute only one congregation. They must necessarily have assembled for the observance of



religious ordinances as separate congregations—and they must have required an extensive eldership to superintend them. The principle of representation, however, though it may not altogether accord with the letter, does not violate the spirit of presbytery. Where the congregations are removed at considerable distances from each other, and where all the elders, if assembled together, would prove inconveniently numerous for the purposes of deliberation, there is no violation done to the spirit of presbyterian government when sessions appoint representatives to meet and deliberate concerning the interests of their respective congregations and of the church at large.

In connexion with this subject, I would venture to suggest, whether it might not have a beneficial effect upon the elders themselves, and whether it might not be conducive to the advancement of religion in the various congregations, to throw the meetings of presbytery more open to the eldership than it has hitherto been. It might involve too great a change in our present system, and might give occasion to considerable disorder, to permit **all** the elders of the various sessions to sit and vote, as a matter of course, in the presbytery. But might not meetings of presbytery be held from time to time, which all the elders of the district were not merely permitted, but

invited, to attend, for the purpose of prayer and deliberation concerning the state of religion within the bounds of the presbytery—and also with the view of stirring up each other to the more diligent and faithful performance of the duties connected with their office? This practice has, to a certain extent, been adopted in some presbyteries with the happiest results. Were it to become universal—and to be steadily persevered in—the views of the eldership would become more enlarged—ministers and elders would become more united to each other, in consequence of their frequently assembling together for such important deliberations—and a powerful stimulus would be given to religion in the various congregations.

I would further suggest that the present mode, ordinarily followed in sessions, of appointing the elders, *by rotation*, to attend the meetings of presbytery, though it has its advantages, has also its disadvantages; and it may fairly be questioned whether the former are not more than counterbalanced by the latter. Its advantages are, that it gives all the members of session an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the forms of ecclesiastical procedure, and with the management of business—and it brings them, from time to time, into friendly

intercourse with the ministers and elders of other congregations. Its disadvantages are, that the most incompetent members are sometimes appointed to represent the session in the presbytery—persons whose habits and attainments totally unfit them for the transacting of public business : And at other times members are appointed, who, though they are in every respect competent for the management of business, yet their employments are such as to prevent them from giving attendance upon the meetings of presbytery—and thus the very object, for which their appointment has taken place, is frustrated. In so far as the management of business and the general interests of the church are concerned, it would be a decided improvement if sessions would send up, as representatives to the presbyteries, their most active and intelligent members ; and in no case ought any one to be appointed who will not undertake to fulfil his appointment, by giving regular attendance upon the meetings of presbytery. If their worldly circumstances be such as to render it inconvenient for them to bear the expenses which such attendance may involve, it is proper that the session adopt means for defraying their charges.

The elders who, in ordinary circumstances, attend the meetings of presbytery are few when compared

with the number of ministers who give attendance. In many instances the number of elders present is so small, as to render the representation of the sessions little else than a name. This is not as it ought to be. A healthful state of the church requires that elders take an active part in the management of those affairs that are connected with the advancement of religion and with the prosperity of the church. It is a mistake to suppose that such management ought to be left in the hands of ministers. Ministers are no doubt required, by virtue of their office, to bear rule in the house of God. But they have other important duties, connected with their office (besides that of ruling) that demand their attention : whereas ruling is the *peculiar* duty of the eldership ; and there are many in all our churches, invested with this office, whose business habits and general intelligence eminently fit them for being successful labourers in that sphere of usefulness which they have been called upon, by the suffrages of their brethren, to occupy. Those gifts and talents which the great Head of the church has conferred upon them, cannot be better employed than in benefiting the souls of their fellow men, and promoting the honour of their divine Master.

2. The conduct of the ruling elder viewed in

relation to the session. The session consists of the minister and elders belonging to a particular congregation. The superintendence of every thing connected with the spiritual state of the congregation is its proper business. The minister is to preach and to administer the sacraments; and the elders are to take part with him in bearing rule. They are to co-operate in every scheme that may be fitted to promote the spiritual well-being of those entrusted to their charge. The number of elders in a session must be determined by the particular circumstances of the congregation. If the congregation be numerous, the eldership ought to be proportionably so: If the congregation be small, a smaller number of elders will suffice. In every case it is desirable that the numerical strength of the session be such, when compared with the size of the congregation, as will give weight to its deliberations, and cause its decisions to be respected. A session, consisting of two or three members (besides the minister), cannot be supposed to exert the same moral influence as one consisting of three or four times that number. The proverb, that "in the multitude of counsellors there is safety," is one that accords with the natural feelings of mankind. If, however, there be a difficulty in finding suitable persons to accept of

the office of the eldership, it is much better that the number of elders in a session be small, than that persons should be appointed to this office who are destitute of the scriptural qualifications. A worldly, careless, and ill-conditioned eldership must have a blasting influence upon the spiritual prosperity of any congregation.

The meetings of session ought to be held at stated, and not very distant, intervals. In towns, where elders can more conveniently assemble than in the country, monthly meetings ought to be held. In the rural districts, where the elders have frequently a considerable distance to travel, and where the congregations are generally smaller than in the towns, a meeting held once in the six weeks, or every two months, will be sufficient. Should there be no regular sessional business to occupy the attention of members at these stated meetings, the time devoted to them will be profitably spent in devotional exercises, and in conversing about the state of religion in the congregation and in the church.

All the elders should make it a matter of conscience to attend every meeting of session, except in cases when they may be prevented from being present by circumstances over which they have no control. There is sometimes a criminal remissness

on the part of elders in this respect. They absent themselves from meetings of session more frequently than they attend ; and this, too, without any valid reason. They leave the business to be done by others—forgetting that what is the duty of one is the duty of all the members. I am aware that there are persons so situated, in the providence of God, as to their worldly employments, that they are not masters of their own time ; and yet, in other respects, they may be well qualified for sustaining the office of ruling elder. It would certainly be a matter of regret that the church should be deprived of the valuable services of such individuals, because they may not have it in their power to attend every meeting of session. The reflection I have made is not designed to apply to such. Their absence from meetings of session is matter of necessity, and not of choice. I have in view those whose time is, in a great measure, at their own disposal,—and who, by making proper arrangements as to the conducting of their worldly business, would not have much difficulty in finding ample leisure to devote both to the public and the private duties of the eldership ; and yet their place is found frequently empty in meetings of their brethren. Every individual member of session should give as regular attendance upon such meet-



ings, as if the whole charge of the business devolved upon himself.

While all the members of session exercise a general superintendence over the congregation, each elder ought to have a particular district of the congregation placed under his special charge; and to the families contained in this district he ought to give particular attention; he ought also to keep a correct list of the names of those who are in full communion, residing within the district. It would have a happy effect in promoting the interests of religion in the congregation, if, besides the visitation of the sick, he visited, at least once every half-year, all the families placed under his charge—giving due notice beforehand to those whom he intended visiting, that they might be prepared for receiving him. This visitation would furnish him with a suitable opportunity for becoming acquainted with the religious state of each family—for admonishing those who might be guilty of improprieties of conduct—for stirring up to the performance of religious duty those who might be living in the neglect of it—and for giving timely warning to those who might be in danger of falling into the commission of some particular sin. At every such visitation, the elder ought to engage in prayer with the family; and in every instance where he found it necessary to



admonish or reprove any member for unchristian conduct, such admonition and reproof ought to be administered in private. It were further desirable that every elder should have a meeting for prayer in his district—held, if possible, once a week ; or, should circumstances render it inconvenient to hold it so frequently, it might be held at least once a fortnight, or every month. Even supposing that only two or three individuals in the district should be found willing to attend such meetings, yet they are of such importance, in a christian point of view, that persevering efforts ought to be made with the view of organising and maintaining them.

Reports ought to be given in to the session, by the elders, of the state of religion in their respective quarters—at least once every half-year : and at those meetings of session, where such reports are received, some time ought to be spent in deliberating on the state of the congregation—with the view of rectifying what may be amiss—or of giving encouragement to what may be promising in its condition. There ought also on such occasions to be special prayer for the down-pouring of the Spirit, in reference both to the congregation and to the church at large.

3. The conduct of the ruling elder viewed in relation to the superintendence of the young. That

office-bearers ought to attend to the spiritual interests of the young, may be inferred from the charge which our Lord gave to Peter, when he said to him, "Feed my lambs." These constitute a very important portion of the flock; and much of the prosperity of religion in any church must depend upon the kind of training which they receive: for it is to the rising race that the church looks for those who are to fill up the blank which death is constantly occasioning in the circle of its membership; and if, through neglect on the part of those who ought to attend to the instruction of the young, they be permitted to grow up without any proper religious training, one of two consequences will follow—either they will not think it worth their while to join in the communion of the church—or should they enter her communion, they will carry along with them a thoroughly secularised spirit—and vital godliness will expire.

There is a solemn injunction addressed to parents, in reference to this matter, which is, that they are to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; and it is the duty of elders, as overseers in the house of God, to see that parents yield obedience to this command. They who notoriously neglect it ought to be dealt with, as violators of the

law of Christ. In the visitation of their districts, by the elders, they should make it their endeavour to ascertain how far this duty is attended to by parents. Those who are exemplary in the performance of it, they should encourage ;—and those who are careless they should stimulate by admonition and reproof. Sessions ought to charge themselves with the formation and superintendence of Sabbath schools and classes for the young. They should consider these as a part of the moral machinery necessary for the spiritual improvement of the rising race. Such institutions have now stood the test of experience. They have been found to aid parental instruction at home : they have also proved serviceable in communicating religious knowledge to many young persons, who, at home, have none to care for them.

In many congregations, the minister has one or more classes of young people under his immediate charge, to the instruction of whom he devotes a portion of his time. In addition to these classes, there are, in many of the congregations, Sabbath schools designed for the instruction of those who are of a more tender age. I believe that in most cases, if not in all, the elders (or at least a portion of them) do take an interest in these institutions. They act the part of instructors in them—and otherwise labour

to promote their success. But it appears to me, that it would have a very beneficial effect if, instead of leaving the organisation and conducting of Sabbath schools to the efforts of pious individuals in a congregation—who may be more zealous than the rest—sessions would devote more of their time and attention to this subject than they have hitherto done. They should make the organisation of them, and the various details connected with their efficient management, a regular part of their sessional business—considering that, while they are doing so, they are carrying into effect the injunction which the Saviour has given, when he said, “Feed my lambs.” Sessions might for instance, with propriety, take into consideration such matters as the following connected with this subject :—The particular localities where it may be necessary to institute Sabbath schools—the persons who ought to take the charge of them—the mode in which they ought to be conducted—the exercises that ought to be prescribed to the scholars—and the seasons at which they ought to meet. In whatever locality any of these schools may be instituted, one or more elders should be appointed either to have the superintendence of them, or at least to visit them frequently. These elders ought to see that the children in their respective districts avail themselves

of the opportunity of receiving religious instruction, which is thus brought within their reach. They should stir up the parents to send their children to the schools—and they should give all manner of encouragement to those young persons, who may be exemplary for their attendance and for their diligence. A correct list of the scholars attending the various classes ought to be kept. This list should be read in the session, at least once every year—when the state of the schools should at the same time come under review. At these meetings, reports should be received from the elders, who have been appointed to attend to the schools, as to the number of scholars who are in the habit of attending, and as to the progress which they are making ; and some time ought to be spent in considering what farther means may be adopted, with the view of rendering these schools more efficient for promoting the religious improvement of the young.

This is indeed a subject of vital importance. It is closely connected with the advancement or with the decay of religion. It demands, on the part of office-bearers, the exercise of their highest energies. It is criminal in any to regard it with indifference. If there be any one cause, to which the decay of vital godliness in a country is more attributable than another, this cause is neglect in giving to the young

that religious training which, by the blessing of God, is fitted to make them ornaments in the church of Christ and useful members of society. Should there be ministers or elders who consider attention to this subject as beneath their notice, or who, while they admit the importance of the duty involved in it, refuse to put themselves to any trouble in order to discharge the obligation under which they lie to the young,—assuredly such persons are animated by a spirit different from that which animated the divine Redeemer who, while upon earth, said, “Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not ;”—and who regarded the religious instruction of the young to be a matter of such importance, that he gave a special instruction to one of the most distinguished of his apostles to feed his lambs.

4. The conduct of the ruling elder viewed in relation to missionary exertion. The cause of missions is rapidly rising in importance, in all the churches throughout our land. There is scarcely a religious denomination that has not now its own peculiar field of missionary labour occupied by its own band of missionaries. This is as it ought to be. A church that is not in heart and soul a missionary church is not entitled to the name. The signs of the times seem to indicate that this spirit of missionary enterprise

will more and more increase—and that the resources of the church will yet be called forth in this great and glorious work, to an extent beyond what even the most sanguine can at present form any conception of. This is a work to which it becomes those, who bear rule in the house of God, to put forth their hand. To the honour of the eldership be it affirmed, that amongst them are to be found some of the staunchest friends and most liberal supporters of missions of which the present age can boast. But it is not enough that they give of their substance for this benevolent purpose. The influence, which they possess as office-bearers, they are to exert with the view of stirring up others to take a part in this labour of love. While they set the example of zeal and liberality in extending the kingdom of Christ, they are to employ means for the purpose of inducing those, who are under their charge, to follow the example that is thus set.

I would suggest the following practical measures, in reference to this matter—which might with propriety be adopted by the elders—and which if steadily persevered in, might be productive of good results. Let each elder inquire among those in his district, who, and who are not, members of a missionary association. Let him, in his visits to the families—



and on other occasions—converse familiarly with the people on the subject of missions. Let him bring before their mind, in a prudent way, the claims of the missionary cause, and urge upon them the authority of Christ in reference to these claims. Let him exert himself to diffuse among the people intelligence concerning the progress of the gospel in our own and other countries. With a view to this, he might use his endeavour to put into circulation, among the households of his district, religious magazines and other sources of missionary information. Further, occasional district meetings might be held, expressly for missionary purposes. In these meetings let the elder of the district preside—let him read a portion of missionary intelligence—let him offer up special prayer for the success of missions—and let him call upon others, who may be qualified, to take part with him in conducting these exercises. In a word, let the elders, in their daily intercourse with the people, hold up to their view the missionary cause as one of inconceivable grandeur—as one which is closely identified with the glory of God, and with the best interests of the human race—and which every professed follower of Christ is bound to support. By steadily pursuing such a course as this, they will become the honoured instruments of widely diffusing



a missionary spirit among the people—and of thereby hastening onward the millennial glories of that delightful period, so frequently celebrated in the songs of the prophets, when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

5. The conduct of the ruling elder viewed in relation to the general management of the affairs of the congregation. A distinction has been made between the temporal and the spiritual affairs of a congregation; and it has been affirmed, that elders have to do only with the latter—but have no right to interfere with the former. Such a doctrine as this is not tenable on scriptural grounds. Scripture recognises only one class of rulers in the house of God, namely, elders; and to them—as rulers—it belongs to exercise a general superintendence over the affairs of that portion of the church entrusted to their charge. The principle, now stated, is one that is implied in the very terms employed to describe their office—“Overseers”—“Stewards”—“Governors.” Such designations, as these, imply that the authority, with which they are invested, extends to all the affairs of that spiritual society, over which they have been called upon to bear rule; for it would certainly be strange if any person should be appointed to act as an overseer, steward, or governor of a house or community,

and yet should not be considered as having a right to interfere in matters of vital importance to its well-being. Elders are "to take care of the church of God;" 1 Tim. iii. 5. But how shall they take care of it, but by exercising a careful superintendence over every department of its affairs, and seeing that nothing, connected with the management of these affairs, is done in a manner that shall be injurious to the interests of the society. These statements appear to be no less agreeable to the dictates of common sense, than to the injunctions of Scripture.

But it is alleged, that the pecuniary affairs of a congregation form an exception to such statements;—and it has hitherto been taken almost as a matter for granted, that with affairs of this description elders, acting in their official capacity, have nothing to do. On what principle this department of affairs should be excluded from the superintendence of the eldership, I am at a loss to conceive. I have never heard any satisfactory reason assigned for it. The common reason assigned is, that these are *temporal* affairs, and that such matters do not come within the province of that authority, with which elders are invested. But this is taking the point for granted. It matters not whether the term *temporal* or *spiritual* be applied to the pecuniary affairs of a congregation. One thing

is certain that these affairs involve in them the performance of spiritual duties. The making of provision, for instance, for the maintenance of the poor—and the raising of funds, by the exercise of voluntary liberality, for the payment of ministers' stipends and for defraying other expenses connected with the maintenance of gospel ordinances—are things as plainly inculcated upon Christians, as any other duties enjoined in the word of God. To whom does it belong to see that the necessary funds are raised and applied to their proper purposes, but to those who have been made overseers of the flock? Where is the part of Scripture which says, that they are at liberty to neglect these important matters?

The usual practice in dissenting presbyterian congregations has been, to appoint a class of persons called *managers* to take the charge of what it has been customary to call *the temporalities* of the congregation. I believe that in general these managers have proved themselves faithful to the trust reposed in them—and that they have in many instances put themselves to much trouble and inconvenience for the sake of promoting the prosperity of the congregations, by whom they have been appointed. But the office of manager is not a scriptural one. There is no allusion made in the New Testament, so far as I

know, to any such class of office-bearers. They appear to have been introduced into our congregations as a kind of substitute for the office of the deacon, and yet they neglect one important duty connected with this office, namely, ministering to the wants of the poor. Nay, it has sometimes happened in congregations, that there has been a struggle between the managers and the elders, on this very point,—the former striving to get possession of funds which the latter were desirous to appropriate to the necessities of the indigent. The practice of electing managers ought to be abolished—and there should be a return, in all our congregations, to the scriptural office of the deacon. I have adduced satisfactory evidence, in the preceding pages, to show that this office was designed to be not of temporary but of permanent continuance in the church.

As there may be a difficulty in the minds of some to determine how far the elders and deacons ought to co-operate together, and how far they ought to act independently of each other, in discharging the duties of their respective offices, I shall here make some remarks for the purpose of showing what those views are which Scripture sanctions upon this subject.

The deacons mentioned in the New Testament had entrusted to their charge the “daily ministra-

tion” and the “serving of tables”—not the serving of the sacramental tables, but the giving out from the common fund to every man according as he had need. From this fund, those who preached the gospel would have their wants supplied as well as others—and, as no mention is made of any other fund being possessed by the primitive Christians, it is reasonable to presume, that from the same source the expenses necessarily incurred by the maintenance of gospel ordinances would be defrayed. Acting, therefore, agreeably to scripture precedent, the deacons ought to have committed to their charge those funds which are raised by the voluntary liberality of the people for the relief of the poor, for the support of ministers of the gospel, and for defraying other expenses necessarily incurred by the maintenance of religious ordinances.

In the management of these funds, the deacons ought not to act independently of the authority of the elders. For them to do so, would be setting up a rival authority in the congregation—which would be productive of mischievous effects—and would be subversive of that order which Christ has instituted in his church. It is to be borne in mind, that the deacons are never once mentioned as rulers. Their title imports that they are servants. In the twelfth

chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians, twenty-eighth verse, they are called *helps*. They are helps or assistants to the eldership in administering the affairs of the congregation, in that particular department that has now been mentioned. They are subject to the authority of the session no less than the other members of the church are. In their official actings there ought to be a co-operation between them and the elders. Both in the raising of funds, and in the disbursement of them, they ought to have the concurrence of the eldership—whose commission authorises them to oversee all the affairs of the house of God. We find that after the office of the deacon was instituted in the christian church, when the churches of Macedonia and of the other provinces made pecuniary contributions for the relief of the brethren that dwelt in Judea, during a time of great distress, they sent their collections by the hands of Barnabas and Paul, not to the deacons, but *to the elders*. Acts xi. 30. I consider this as a proof that the elders, so far from being excluded from any share in the management of funds collected for pious purposes, were regarded by the churches as exercising a superintendence over the distribution of these funds.

It follows as a necessary deduction from the statements now made, that the deacons ought not to have

separate courts for the transacting of business : they ought to meet in company with the elders. It is not by this meant to affirm that the deacons are to meet along with the elders for the conducting of sessional business ; but when it is necessary that they assemble for deliberation concerning the affairs connected with their office, the meeting ought not to consist of the deacons only—but of the elders and deacons conjointly. Though the deaconship is undoubtedly a distinct office, and of divine appointment, yet those who are invested with this office are merely “ helps ”—not rulers ; and while it is their duty to take the charge of the funds, raised by the liberality of the members of the church for pious purposes, and to see that they be applied to their proper objects, they ought always to act in concert with and under the superintendence of the elders.

The existence of two separate courts in the same congregation (one for the elders and another for the deacons), besides being at variance with what appears to have been the practice of the early Christians, is almost certain to give rise to a collision of authority—and thereby to produce jarrings among those who ought to be united in the same good work. The distinction between the office of the elder and the office of the deacon, as to their nature,

is—that the one is authoritative—the other is merely administrative ; and the latter, therefore, is to be regarded as subordinate to the former. To the eldership is entrusted by Christ the oversight of every thing connected with the government of his church upon earth ; and to the deacons is entrusted the administration of affairs in a particular department of the service of God's house—and in administering the affairs of this department, they act, not as rulers, but as assistants to those who are over them in the Lord.

Such are the views, which Scripture authorises us to take, of the distinctive duties of the elder and of the deacon. I have shown, that while the duties of the latter are limited to a particular department, the duties of the former are most extensive and varied. The situation which the ruling elder occupies—viewed in relation to God, to the church, and to the world—is one of the most important in which a human being can be placed ; and if those who occupy this honourable and responsible situation, would only devote the full energies both of mind and body to discharge the onerous duties connected with their office, it is impossible to tell what an amount of benefit would result to the church from their united and persevering exertions. By the blessing



of God upon their labours, “ the wilderness would become a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest : Then judgment would dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness in the fruitful field ; and the work of righteousness would be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever.”

## CHAPTER IX.

Responsibility of elders—Responsibility connected with declining to accept of the office of elder—Excuses of those who decline accepting of the office considered—Address to elders—The nature of the charge committed to them—The person from whom they receive the charge—The object for which it is committed to them—The prosperity of religion much dependent on the manner in which they discharge the duties of their office—Address to members of presbyterian churches—The duty of maintaining the presbyterian form of government—The advantages of it—A union among the various sections of evangelical presbyterians desirable—Practicable—The aspect of the present times calls loudly for such a union—The duty of cultivating a feeling of brotherly affection toward Christians of all religious denominations—Concluding statements.

BEFORE bringing this treatise to a close, I shall address myself to the elders of the church, for the purpose of pressing home upon them the high responsibility, under which they lie to be faithful in discharging the duties of their office: I shall also, in the conclusion, address a few parting words to the members of the presbyterian churches. When about to consider the responsibility of elders, it may not be improper here to notice the aversion, which many

persons manifest, to accept of the office of the eldership, when the will of God has been clearly manifested to them through the call of the people. On account of this aversion, there is frequently a considerable difficulty felt in congregations, to obtain suitable persons to act as office-bearers in the house of God. I ask—Is there no responsibility lying upon those, who decline accepting of the eldership, as well as on those who do accept?—There is—and that, too, of a very serious kind. Some plead, as an excuse for refusing to occupy such an honourable situation in the church, their unfitness for the office. Some plead the nature of their worldly pursuits. Some plead the hurry of business, by which their time and attention are completely occupied. Some plead the labour and trouble, to which they will be subjected, by undertaking such an office: While some doggedly refuse to accept, without assigning any particular reason for the refusal.

I do not mean to say that there may not be very good reasons why persons, who are called, by the voice of the people, to the office of the eldership, may see it to be their duty to decline complying with the call that is given. But what I affirm is, that in a large proportion of the cases of refusal, the reasons that are urged are not such as appear to be satisfac-

tory, either to the session or the people. I would remind those who may at any time be placed in these circumstances, that if there be a responsibility connected with the accepting of the office of an elder, there is also a responsibility lying on those who decline to accept. If they admit that this office is of divine institution—and if they believe that this is the instrumentality which God has appointed for conducting the government of his house—then the question naturally presents itself—How is the government of the church to be administered, agreeably to the laws of Christ, if those who are called upon to bear a part in it shall refuse to do so? In so far as *they* are concerned, this particular form of government (which they admit to be scriptural) must cease. By refusing to lend a helping hand in carrying it on, they are virtually doing what they can to abolish it. They are chargeable with disobedience to the King of Zion, by refusing to assist in administering his laws. It will not do for them to shift the responsibility from themselves by saying, that others will undertake to do what they decline—and that the work will be better done by others than it could be done by them. What reason have they to expect that this will be the case? Why may not others decline as well as they? If they are

at liberty to decline, without any good reasons—or at least without any reasons that are satisfactory to those who are called upon to judge of them—why may not others enjoy the same liberty? If there be responsibility and trouble connected with the office, it is selfish and unchristian to shift them from ourselves, in the expectation that others will be found willing to undertake them: and even though others should undertake to do what we decline, this will not excuse us in shrinking from the post of duty, when called upon in providence to occupy it. When any individual is called, by the suffrages of his fellow Christians, to the office of the eldership, he should consider this a call given him in providence to occupy a sphere of public usefulness in the church; and instead of disdainfully rejecting the call—or seeking for excuses that may serve as an apology for non-compliance—he should, unless there be some formidable obstacles lying in the way, enter with cheerfulness on the work assigned him, in humble dependence upon divine grace—esteeming it a privilege, as well as a duty, to labour as an office-bearer in the service of Christ.

In addressing myself to the brethren in the eldership, I would present to them the following considerations, for the purpose of showing them the

nature and amount of that responsibility under which they lie, in consequence of the office which they hold.

*First*, Consider the *nature of the charge* that has been committed to you. You have had committed to your care the flock of God—that flock which he purchased with his own blood. Every member of it is precious in his sight; and every member of it ought to be dear to you. Yours is by far the most important trust that can be committed to the charge either of men or of angels. You have been solemnly set apart to the oversight of the church of the living God; that church which the Saviour died to redeem. The value of it may be estimated from the greatness of the price that was paid for its redemption. Connected with such a charge, there must, indeed, be a weighty responsibility. If you had a certain amount of gold and silver committed to your care by any of your fellow-men, you would consider it your duty carefully to guard the precious deposit. Your responsibility would be increased in proportion to the value of the treasure placed under your charge; and were you to betray the trust reposed in you, the stamp of infamy would be upon your character. But though all the treasure in the world were to be placed in your keeping, it would fall far short in

value when compared with that charge which has been committed to you. Immortal souls have been placed under your care ; and to show you the value of such a trust, you are reminded that these souls have been redeemed, not with corruptible things, such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without spot. Human language does not furnish words better fitted for impressing upon your minds a high idea of the value which the persons of the Godhead attach to the souls of men, than when you are told that, in order to save these souls from perishing, the Son of God suffered and died. Seeing that the church of Christ consists of persons who have been redeemed by his blood, what an aggregate of value must be connected with it. The amount of it no arithmetic can calculate. The great Head of the church has committed to your charge this sacred treasure ; and he requires you to watch over it, that no spoiler may invade it. When you submitted to be ordained to the office of the eldership, you accepted of the charge ; and you promised, in the presence of your fellow-men, and in the sight of God, that you would be faithful to your trust. Will you not then redeem the pledge which you have thus given ? Or, will you, by the criminal neglect of the duties of

your office, violate the obligations under which you have solemnly come? Will you trifle with the spiritual interests of those immortal beings over whom you have been appointed to watch? Will you attend to your merchandise, your farms, your amusements, and your schemes of wordly aggrandisement, while the affairs of the house of God—which have been solemnly entrusted to your charge—are overlooked by you. You will not surely so far forget the engagements into which you have entered, by acting such an inconsistent part. Remember the responsibility under which you lie, in consequence of the importance of the charge that has been committed to you.

*Secondly, Consider from whom it is that you have received your charge.* I am warranted in addressing you in language similar to that in which Paul addressed the elders of the church of Ephesus, when he said to them, “Take heed, therefore, to yourselves and to all the flock, over the which *the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers.*” The charge which you hold has been committed to you by God himself. You hold it by virtue of a divine commission. On the supposition that you have been called and set apart to the office of the eldership, agreeably to those rules which the Head of the church has laid



down, you are “the ministers of Christ”—you are “the stewards of God;” and this consideration is mentioned by an apostle as a reason why you should be faithful in discharging the duties of your office: “Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful;” 1 Cor. iv. 1, 2. He mentions it also as a reason why you should be blameless in your conduct: “An overseer (or an elder) must be blameless, as the steward of God;” Tit. i. 7. You are to remember that you are not acting for yourselves. You are not acting as the representatives of your fellow-men. You are acting *for God*. You are *his* stewards. He hath made you overseers in his church. It is in his name, and by virtue of his authority that you act. He has addressed to you the injunctions—“Feed my flock”—“Occupy till I come”—“Go ye also into the vineyard, and that which is right I will give you.” This consideration confers dignity upon your office, namely, that you are the servants not of men, but of God. You are fulfilling a trust which he has committed to you. He has counted you faithful, putting you into the eldership. But the same consideration adds to the responsibility connected with your office; for as you

have received your charge from God, so it is to him that your account must be rendered. If you were amenable only to the judgment of your fellow-men, in discharging the duties of your office, this would be a matter of comparatively little consequence : for you are told that it is a small thing to be judged of man's judgment. But it is *with God* you have to do—and not with man. The office which you hold is his stewardship. He has honoured you by investing you with it. He requires and expects of you that you be faithful ; and you ought to act under a deep sense of the responsibility under which you lie, in consequence of his having reposed in you such a trust. If there be a strong obligation to fidelity lying upon those whom an earthly potentate has appointed to some high office in his realm—how much stronger the obligation lying upon those whom the King of Zion has appointed to occupy the responsible situation of rulers in his church. Let this consideration be ever present to your mind, that Christ is your master. You are labourers in his service ; and let the prospect of the account which you must one day render unto him, stimulate you to unceasing diligence and to unwavering fidelity.

*Thirdly, Consider the object with a view to which the charge has been committed to you. What is this object ?*

It is, in subordination to the glory of God, the promoting of the spiritual and eternal well-being of your fellow-men. Paul, when vindicating in his own behalf, and in behalf of his fellow-labourers, the exercise of authority in the church, mentions that this authority had been conferred upon them, with a view to the edification of those persons who are the subjects of it: "Which authority (he says) the Lord hath given us for edification, and not for your destruction;" 2 Cor. x. 8. In being appointed, then, to bear rule in the church, you have an important object set before you, which you are required steadily to promote; and that object is the spiritual improvement of your fellow men. The authority, with which as office-bearers you are invested, has been given you for their edification. Your office is designed to have an influence upon the spiritual interests of mankind. It has been instituted for the special purpose of promoting the present and eternal well-being of immortal souls. If the duties of it be not discharged in such a manner as that this object shall be gained, then the main design of its institution is frustrated. To reclaim men from the love and practice of sin—to win them to Christ—to lead them onward in the path of holiness—and thereby train them up for heaven,—these are all included in that

object, for the furtherance of which, your authority is to be exercised ; namely, the *edification* of those over whom you have the oversight. There is therefore a weighty charge resting upon you—a charge which involves in it a high responsibility. *The welfare of immortal souls* is entrusted to your care. This is the object, which by virtue of your office, you are solemnly bound to promote. Will you—can you trifle with it ? If the life of any of your fellow-mortals were at stake—if it were entrusted to your charge—and if in consequence of your trifling, it were to be lost—would there be no guilt lying at your door ? Assuredly there would. What then shall be said, if you trifle not with the lives, but with the souls of those who have been entrusted to your care ? If, while you are appointed to watch over these souls, you will not labour to promote their spiritual welfare, according to the extent of your ability, will you be accounted faithful ? And if any of them perish through your neglect, will you be guiltless ? Ah, no : At your hand will these souls be required. It is both accordant with scripture and reason, that the greater the value attached to any object, that may be committed to our care, the greater is the responsibility lying on us, to be faithful to the trust reposed in us ; and seeing that there is no object

that can rank higher in importance, than that for the accomplishing of which, the christian eldership has been appointed,—it follows that the responsibility lying upon those, who have been invested with this office, is indeed great.

*Fourthly, Consider how much the prosperity of religion depends on the manner in which you discharge the duties of your office.* The hands of ministers of the gospel are strengthened or weakened, according as the elders, who are associated with them in the work of ruling, are faithful and laborious, or the opposite. If you are diligent, this will greatly encourage your ministers in their Master's work, and will tend much to promote religion among the flock. If, on the other hand, you are careless—and neglect the duties, which as elders you ought to perform—you will thereby counteract the good effects, that might otherwise result from the faithful preaching of the gospel. Religion will languish among the people of your charge. Cold formality will succeed to vital godliness. The community, over which you preside, instead of resembling the garden of the Lord, planted with the trees of righteousness, will resemble a waste, covered with thorns and briers. Your influence, as elders, is not limited to your own congregations. It extends to the church at large; for

you are called upon to deliberate and determine concerning matters in which the whole church is concerned. What a powerful influence are you fitted to exercise upon the community of which you are members. What an amount of good may you be instrumental in accomplishing, in the church, by your united exertions. In what a variety of ways may you prove yourselves blessings to your fellow-men, by being conscientious in discharging the duties of your office. On the other hand, should you be slothful and careless, you will not only fail in accomplishing the good, which you have it in your power to perform, but you will positively retard the progress of religion. You will be the means of occasioning incalculable mischief to the church. Discipline will be neglected—purity of communion will be undervalued—family religion will languish—the distinction between the church and the world will be obliterated—and the cause of Christ, which you have solemnly engaged to promote, will be sadly dishonoured through your criminal neglect.

I am not over-rating the influence which, as a body of men, you possess in the presbyterian churches; and this influence will be exercised by you, either for good or evil, according to the manner in which you discharge the trust reposed in you.

If you are faithful, your influence will be for good ; if you are unfaithful, it will be for evil. This consideration—no less than those to which I have previously adverted—shows the greatness of the responsibility under which you lie. In consequence of the station which you occupy, and the influence which you possess, you have the means of doing good to a great extent ; and you are certainly responsible to your Master for the use that you make of these means, which he has conferred upon you. If you employ them aright, you will be the honoured instruments of advancing the cause of righteousness in the world. If you neglect to make a proper use of them, instead of conferring benefits upon your fellow-men, you will inflict upon them positive evil. To you who occupy the office of the eldership, the following language of the Saviour is peculiarly applicable—“Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick ; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven ;” Matt. v. 14-16.

*Finally*, Brethren,—“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder. Feed the flock

of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind: Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock: And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away."<sup>1</sup>

I shall now address myself, in conclusion, to the members of the presbyterian churches. That Christ has appointed a particular form of government in his church—and that this form is the presbyterian—has, I trust, been satisfactorily established in the preceding pages. That there were elders in all the primitive churches—that these elders ruled—and that the people were required to obey them, and to esteem them highly in love for their work's sake—is abundantly evident from the statements contained in the apostolical writings. For that form of ecclesiastical government termed *episcopacy*, I can find no warrant in the word of God. It is true that the word *bishop* repeatedly occurs in the New Testament. But this word, I have shown, means simply an *overseer*—and is convertible with the term *elder*. Among the teaching elders, there was no superiority of the

<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter v. 1-4.



one over the other. They were all on a footing of equality ; and between the teaching and the ruling elders there was no difference, as to the authority which they possessed ; they were on an equal footing, in so far as the government of the church was concerned. Neither do I find in Scripture, a sufficient warrant for that form of government which is termed *independency*. Those who adopt this form, reject the office of the ruling elder. By doing so, they reject a divine institution. They give to the private members of the church the power of ruling—a power which Scripture denies them. They find a kind of substitute for the ruling elder, in the person who is invested with the office of the deacon—and who, though he may not formally rule, yet, along with the pastor, takes the oversight of the flock ; and by doing so, he exercises a power which does not belong to his office. *Presbyterianism* is opposed, on the one hand, to that lordly rule, which diocesan bishops exercise, not only over the people, but over their brethren in the ministry ; and, on the other hand, to that disorder which must almost necessarily ensue, where all aspire to be rulers. It draws a line of demarcation between those who rule and those who are ruled. It points out the scriptural duties that belong to each of these classes. To the former it

gives no power of making laws for the church ; but it recognises them as persons appointed to administer the laws which Christ has laid down for the government of his house. The latter it requires to be in subjection to those who rule over them—as to an ordinance of Christ.

If infinite wisdom has appointed the presbyterian form of government as the one which is best adapted for administering the affairs of the kingdom of Christ—this, certainly, ought to be regarded by you, who are members of the presbyterian churches, as a good reason why you should uphold this particular form of government, in preference to every other. Regarding it as an institution of Christ, you are bound to maintain it. You are not at liberty to substitute, in its place, any institution of human device. Under this form of ecclesiastical government, you enjoy advantages which are not enjoyed under any other. You have, in your ruling elders, a class of men, who—generally speaking—are pious and prudent, and exemplary. They are persons, whom you yourselves have called to occupy the office of the eldership, on account of their peculiar fitness for it. The spiritual authority, which they have received from the Head of the church, is exercised by them “ for your edification, and not

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for your destruction.” This authority is not that of a despotic ruler—who admits of no compeers to deliberate along with him—who sits alone upon the seat of judgment, refusing to receive counsel from any—and from whose decision there lies no appeal. Neither is it the authority of a promiscuous multitude, who are assembled to act the part of judges, without any regard to their peculiar qualifications for the office—and who sit in judgment on each other under the exciting and dangerous influence of personal partialities, on the one hand, and of personal antipathies on the other. But it is the authority of persons, who are specially appointed to exercise it—and who, in exercising it, act as a judicatory constituted in the name of Christ, who has given it to them in charge to rule his flock, and who has graciously promised to be with them when thus engaged.

In this system of government, excellent provision is made for the faithful and impartial administration of discipline, by the appointment, in each congregation, of a class of office-bearers whose special work it is to superintend the flock. These persons are elected, by their fellow-Christians, on account of their possessing the qualifications which fit them, in the estimation of their brethren, for the right discharge of the duties of their office. They act by virtue of an authority

received, not from men, but from Christ: and when they administer discipline to any individual member, they do it after full investigation made by them, as a session—and as the result of prayerful and solemn deliberation. There is also provision made, in this system, for preventing the abuse of power on the part of the elders of a congregation. Should any member think that the session have acted toward him unjustly, or harshly, and should he feel aggrieved by what they have done, he can bring the matter under the review of a higher judicatory—one that is removed from all local influence—namely, the presbytery; and should he be dissatisfied with the judgment that is here pronounced, he can bring his cause before a still higher tribunal, namely, the Synod or general assembly of the church with which he is connected.

As all power is liable to be abused, so it is right that there should be some way of checking such abuse, and of remedying the evil effects that flow from power which has been abused. The presbyterian form of government, in the subordination of one ecclesiastical judicatory to another, furnishes a more efficient method both for preventing abuse, and also for remedying the evil effects that flow from it, than any other form of government that has been proposed. According to this form, all the office-

bearers are subject to the courts, with which they are severally connected. Elders are subject to their session—and ministers are subject to their presbytery. There is, therefore, a check exercised over each, by means of the judicatories to which they are thus subject: so that, should any office-bearer be remiss in the discharge of his duty, or be guilty of any scandalous offence, he is amenable to the authority of his brethren. To them it belongs to admonish him of his duty, to censure him on account of his sin, or to remove him from his office altogether, should his conduct be such as to render this procedure necessary. In the right, which he possesses, of removing his cause from a local tribunal, and bringing it under the consideration of the assembled elders and ministers of the church, he has a guarantee that substantial justice shall be done to him. I am not aware that episcopacy, or independency furnishes such advantages, on the one hand, for the faithful administration of discipline toward office-bearers who are chargeable either with error or immorality—or, on the other, for protecting the rights of office-bearers, should they be unjustly accused, or harshly dealt with, by their brethren in the particular locality where they reside.

Another advantage, which presbyterianism possesses, is unity of operation among those who

are members of the same church. As opposed to episcopacy, it recognises a complete equality among the brethren—while, as opposed to independency, it unites them all in a strong bond of brotherhood. The principle of presbyterianism is not simply equality—nor simply union : but equality along with union ;—equality of privilege and union of operation on the part of all the congregations and office-bearers. Presbytery admits of no supremacy, on the part of any teaching or ruling elder over his brethren ; and it admits of no superiority of privilege on the part of particular congregations. When ministers and elders associate together in presbyteries and synods, to deliberate concerning matters of general interest to the church, there is no surrender made by the congregations, of any of their privileges. They are virtually present, on such occasions, by means of their office-bearers ; and when they yield obedience to the decisions that are there pronounced, they are complying with the scriptural injunction, which requires them to submit themselves, and to obey them that are over them in the Lord.

The presbyterian organisation is admirably fitted for securing unity of operation in the church, by means of its judicatories, which, like so many links, connect all the various parts together—and unite

each individual member with the whole. Congregations, that act upon the independent plan, are insulated from each other. There is no particular bond of connexion between them. Each professes to be a church complete in itself. It pursues its own course, irrespective of the rest. Independents, indeed, have of late years begun to appreciate the advantages of union ; and in order to secure these advantages, they have adopted one of the leading features of presbyterianism, by forming associations, in which matters of general concern to the body are transacted : and though those, who assemble in these associations, do not profess to pronounce authoritative decisions concerning individual ministers, or particular congregations, yet they have it in their power to show their disapprobation of sentiments and conduct that are offensive to them, by excluding from their association ministers holding such sentiments, or guilty of such conduct ; and, of course, the congregations adhering to ministers that are excluded, share in the condemnation which is thus virtually pronounced. Such a procedure has all the effect of a judicial sentence, without the formalities of a regular trial.

There is no form of ecclesiastical government, that affords such facilities for the conducting of missions, as the presbyterian. The machinery, which presby-

terianism furnishes, for raising funds, for training up young men to be employed as missionaries, for sending them out to their respective spheres of labour, and for superintending them, after they are sent out, is complete. In every congregation there are office-bearers, whose business it is to superintend the spiritual affairs of the people, and to stir them up to every good work. If these office-bearers be, what they ought to be, they will stir up the people to missionary effort, and will set them the example of activity and liberality in such a glorious cause. Again, the presbytery—being an association of the ministers and elders belonging to a particular locality—constitute an excellent board for superintending the collecting of funds in the various congregations under their charge, and for exciting a missionary spirit both among ministers and people: while the Synod, or general assembly, of the church mark out the fields of missionary labour that are to be occupied—appoint the missionaries who are to occupy these fields—and make such arrangements as, in their wisdom, may seem best fitted for carrying on the missions with vigour and success. Among the preachers, that belong to the association, a certain number will be found, who, while they possess the necessary qualifications for missionary work, will be



ready to go and preach the gospel to their perishing fellow-men in any part of the world.

Such an agency, as that which presbyterianism furnishes, for the training of missionaries—for sending them out to their respective fields of labour—and for superintending their operations—is characterised by its being scriptural, efficient, and economical. In ordinary missionary societies there is much expense incurred by the training of young men, with a view to their being missionaries, by the payment of secretaries, clerks, superintendents, and other officials, connected with the boards of management. If not the whole, at least a considerable part of this expense is saved by the presbyterian organisation; while there is at least equal, if not greater, security given, that in the various departments of labour every thing will be conducted with energy and regularity. Such missions are recognised as the missions *of a church* (which all missions ought to be), and not those of a promiscuous society, the members of which have no common link binding them together, except it be that of giving an annual subscription for the diffusion of the gospel. On the grounds now stated, I consider the presbyterian churches as placed in peculiarly favourable circumstances for carrying on missionary operations either at home or abroad.

Some of them have long been distinguished for their missionary spirit—and for the generous and disinterested exertions which they have made in sending the gospel to distant lands ; and I rejoice to see that all of them are now entering on the same glorious career. They are labouring, *as churches*, in diffusing the knowledge of the gospel, not only among the ignorant at home, but among their perishing fellow-men abroad. Let them go on and prosper. In such a wide field as the world, there is ample room for all to exert themselves in such a sacred cause.

The writer of these pages desiderates much a union among those sections of the presbyterian church, in this country, who, while they hold the doctrines taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith, are at the same time independent of state control. Though there may be among these sections differences of sentiment, on certain points,—these surely are not of such importance as to keep them in a state of separation from one another, while they are completely agreed as to the main articles of the christian faith, and are united in their views of ecclesiastical government. Why, in these circumstances, should Ephraim continue any longer to envy Judah, and Judah to vex Ephraim ? Are not the times in which we live most eventful ? Are not momentous changes

in progress? Is not some great crisis apparently at hand? Are not long-established institutions crumbling to the dust? And are not new ones rising on the ruins of the old? Do not the events, which are daily occurring, both in church and state, indicate that there is an under-current of opinion at work which is gradually acquiring strength, and which will, at no distant period, remodel the very framework of society? In all these mighty movements which are taking place—and which alternately excite our hopes and our fears—Providence is loudly calling upon the churches to unite. There may be obstacles difficult to surmount, which prevent a union from taking place among *all* evangelical churches; but I can see no unsurmountable difficulties, lying in the way, to prevent *all presbyterian churches, holding evangelical sentiments*, from being united into one compact body. The only exception to this statement is the Established Church of Scotland, between which and the unendowed presbyterian churches in this country, there is no hope of a union being accomplished in the present state of parties. But were all the latter to unite, an object of immense importance would be gained. A powerful impulse would be given by such a union to the cause both of religion and of education. A formi-

dable and united phalanx would thereby be arrayed on the side of the truth ; and as it moved onward in its progress, it would scatter on every side of its path the blessings of scriptural knowledge and of religious freedom.

As such a union as this is not impracticable, neither is it to be regarded as hopeless. There are decided indications of a closer approximation to each other of the various sections of the presbyterian church. Let each do what he can to foster in the section, to which he belongs, a spirit of brotherly kindness toward those who belong to the other sections. Let the only strife be, who shall out-run the others in the race of christian benevolence, and who shall be most forward in repairing the breaches which party contention has made in the walls of the city of God. Let persevering efforts be made to remove, one by one, those shibboleths which have not merely kept the friends of Christ in a state of separation, but have placed them in an attitude of hostility to each other. The standard of defiance has long enough been planted on the ground of unholy warfare occupied by religious parties. Let now the flag of peace be unfurled, and let it be seen waving on all the towers of Zion.

To the members of the presbyterian churches, I

would say—while you hold fast your principles, as evangelical presbyterians, on account of their being clearly laid down in the word of God—and while you labour (as in duty bound) to propagate the knowledge of these principles among your fellow-men—let candour and meekness and kindness characterise your contendings for the truth. Show by the holiness of your lives, that the principles which you profess have a purifying influence. Walk in love. Endeavour to win others to the views which you hold by the gentleness of your dispositions, and by the purity of your lives. Should you fail to convince, by your arguments, do not regard as enemies those who may differ from you in opinion. “Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves.”—“Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded; and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.”<sup>1</sup>

While you labour to promote the cause of truth, in connexion with the presbyterian church, give a

<sup>1</sup> Phil. ii. 3; and iii. 15, 16.

place in your heart to the members of other evangelical churches—though their platform of ecclesiastical government may be different from yours. In so far as they hold the Head, you are to regard them as fellow-labourers with you in the great work of evangelizing the world. Should the wall of partition which separates you from them be so high that you cannot stretch the right hand of fellowship across it, you can cherish towards them feelings of good will: and as you cast an occasional glance across the party-boundary, and behold them busy at work in their Master's service—diffusing the light of divine truth, and winning souls to Christ—you can let your voice be heard in accents of kindness, bidding them God-speed in their labours of love. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah lii. 7, 8.

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